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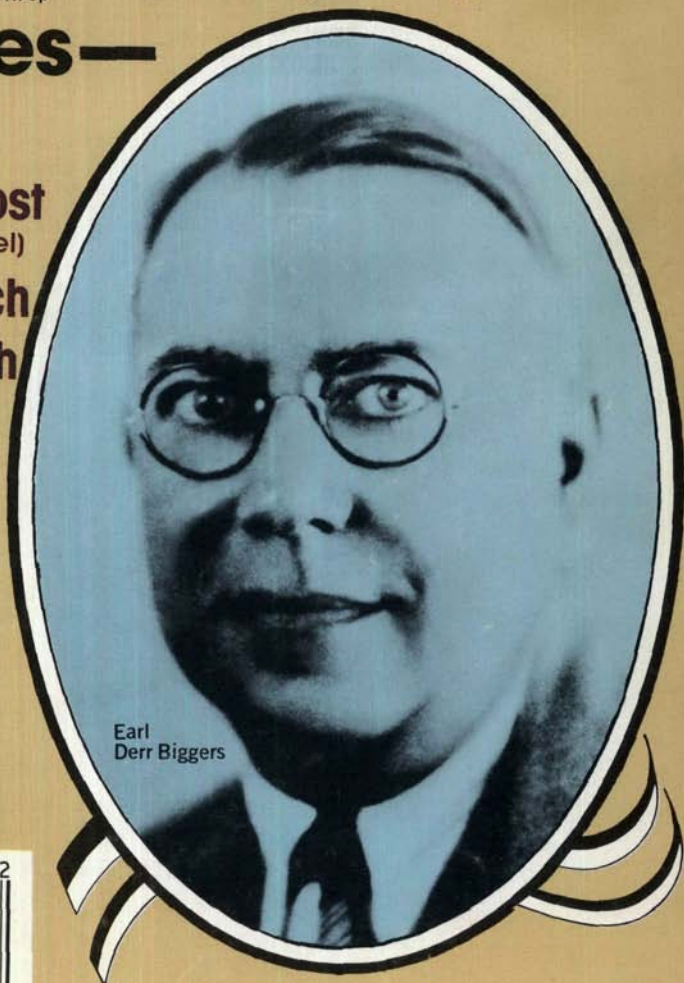
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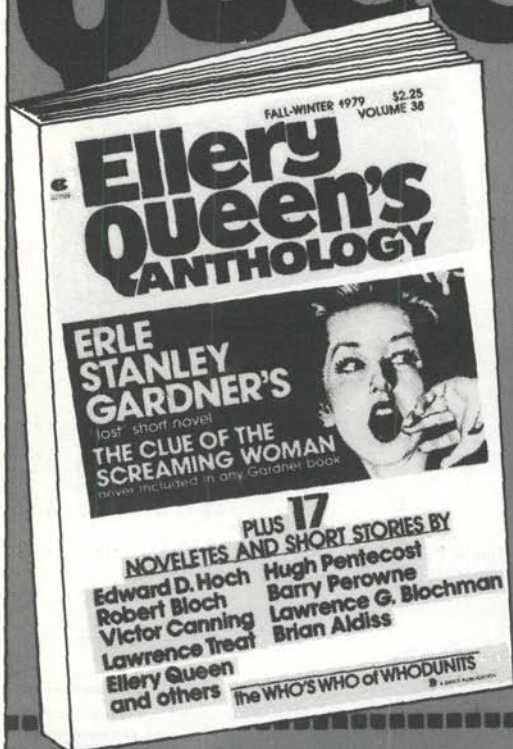
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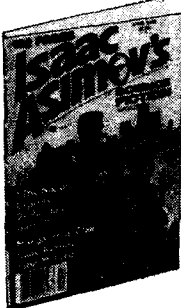
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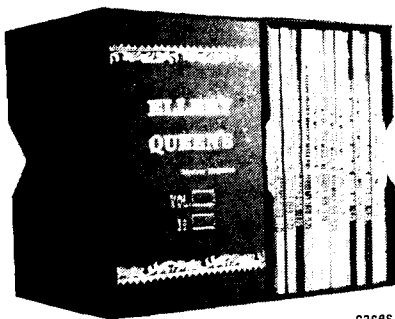
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Let's say a man goes to a gambling club run by a notorious mobster, loses a large sum of money at roulette and blackjack on his personal I.O.U.'s, and then can't pay. Is the man's life in danger? You bet it is. But suppose that same man wins a large sum of money. Is his life still in danger? Well, look at it from this point of view: the mobster is out a large sum of money either way! . . .

THE WAY TO DO IT

by **JACK RITCHIE**

Within the space of an hour I won \$3000 at the roulette table. The girl had been at my elbow for the last 30 minutes. She was quite attractive and had greenish eyes. "This seems to be your lucky night."

I won another \$1000, during the course of which I learned that her name was Adrienne McCloskey.

I picked up my chips and moved on to the blackjack tables.

Adrienne followed. "You've got a streak going at roulette. Why switch to blackjack?"

I smiled. "Roulette is entirely a matter of chance. Or luck, as you would put it. I've decided that I prefer an intellectual challenge, and blackjack, to some degree, gives one a slight control over one's fortunes."

I joined three other patrons at one of the blackjack tables.

I was dealt a nine down and an eight up. Seventeen. I asked the dealer to hit me and received a four. Which, of course, gave me twenty-one.

Adrienne McCloskey winced. "You hit seventeen? Everybody stands on seventeen. Everybody."

"I don't."

I was next dealt a ten down and a nine up. Nineteen. The dealer's exposed card was an eight. I was rather tempted to hit my nineteen

© 1979 by Jack Ritchie.

anyway, but then I thought that I must not be too obvious. I stood on the nineteen and the dealer on his eighteen, and so I won once again.

I continued my policy of hitting anything under eighteen. By eleven o'clock I had picked up another \$2000, making a total of \$6000 for the night.

I glanced at my watch. I should be home in bed by now. I have quite regular habits. I rose. "I guess that's enough for this evening."

Adrienne also consulted her timepiece. "Leaving so early? Going to cut and run?"

"I'm afraid so. For tonight, at least."

"Then you'll be back?"

"I plan to return tomorrow."

She seemed satisfied with that. "I may be here myself."

I had not noticed her making any bets of her own. "Oh? Do you gamble too?"

She smiled. "I like to watch. Some people think I bring them luck."

I cashed in my chips. When I stepped outside, I discovered it was raining. Damn, I thought, what rotten luck. I dashed for my Cadillac in the parking lot and drove home. When I pulled in between the gateposts and up the winding drive, it was approximately 11:30. I parked the car in the oval before the house.

All the windows were dark. Apparently everyone, including the servants on the third floor, had gone to bed.

I let myself in with my key and went upstairs to my rooms on the second floor. I emptied my wallet and stared at the money. Why do other men gamble, I wondered. Sickness? Stupidity?

I had a brandy and soda and then went to bed.

In the morning I joined Aunt Sarah in the sun room at breakfast. I kissed her cheek and then sat down to Canadian bacon and scrambled eggs.

"You came home rather late last night, Roger," she said.

"You were up? The house was dark."

"My insomnia. Where were you?"

"I went to a movie."

She frowned. "I hope it wasn't one of those X-rated things."

"No, Aunt Sarah. Only Restricted."

She appeared mollified. "Well, you *are* an adult, after all, and I guess Restricted can't be too harmful. But I suppose they used a lot of four-letter words?"

"Actually there really aren't too many explicit four-letter words. However, the ones available were repeated frequently."

Aunt Sarah is my father's sister. She never married. My father and my mother are both deceased, victims of a commercial air disaster while I was a junior in college.

After the funeral I discovered that my parents' estate consisted principally of debts. Aunt Sarah accepted it as her duty to see me through college. I had rather expected that she would turn me out to work of some kind once I was graduated, but she seemed to prefer having me about the house. It is not that we are particularly close. I suspect that she simply wants someone of her family nearby.

After breakfast, as I excused myself, Aunt Sarah handed me the familiar long white envelope. Inside I would find a check for \$1000, my allowance for the month.

I kissed her cheek again. "You are most kind and generous, Aunt Sarah."

That evening at eight I returned to Jason's Club. I saw Adrienne at the bar with a rather portly and faintly familiar gentleman. Swenson? Swanson? He was a vice president, or something like that, in one of Aunt Sarah's conglomerates.

When Adrienne saw me, she abandoned him and joined me. "Well, well, you did keep your word to come back, didn't you, Mr. Wentworth?"

I did not remember having given her my name the previous night, but perhaps I was mistaken. I went to the cashier, purchased \$1000 worth of chips and moved to the roulette table.

"I thought blackjack was your game?" Adrienne asked.

"At the moment I feel the urge for roulette."

At the end of the hour I had won \$3000.

As I played, I became aware of a rather thin, black-haired man off to one side, watching me intently. I recognized him as Jason, the owner of the club. I had never met him personally, but I had seen his picture in the newspapers a number of times.

I gathered my chips and moved to the blackjack tables. I sat down and was dealt a queen down and a nine up. The dealer's exposed card was a king.

"Hit me," I said.

I received a deuce. Twenty-one.

"I don't believe it," Adrienne said. "You hit a *nineteen*?"

"The dealer has a king up. I suspected he had a twenty, which, of course, would have made my nineteen insufficient."

The dealer proved to have a concealed ten. Twenty, but not enough.

I continued to win. A few ups and downs, but generally I won, despite the fact that the dealer frequently broke the seals of new decks. Finally Jason replaced him with another dealer, who, I presumed, he felt he could trust more fully. Nothing, however, availed the house.

Adrienne followed me to the cashier. "You seem to have a lot of luck." Her smile did not quite reach her eyes. "Or is it really luck?"

I put my winnings into my wallet. "I'll return tomorrow night."

At home I counted the \$12,000 I had accumulated in the last two nights. I made myself a thoughtful drink.

As is my weekly custom, on Wednesday, I had lunch with Amos Tillman at his favorite restaurant. Tillman is Aunt Sarah's attorney, financial adviser, and regards himself as a friend of the family.

He studied the menu. "By the way, Roger, I've heard that you seem to have taken up gambling."

"Swenson?"

"Swanson. He mentioned that he's seen you at a place called Jason's Club. Twice."

"What was Swanson doing at Jason's Club? Twice?"

Tillman shrugged. "That's his problem. But, Roger, if you're going to gamble, why pick that particular club?"

"I didn't know it was a particular club. I'm rather naive about things like that. I happened to be driving in the vicinity and found myself out of cigarettes. I dropped in at what I thought was merely a bar. I discovered that gambling was available, and never having gambled, I decided to give it a whirl."

"You seem to be a fairly intelligent man, Roger. Why this sudden mania for gambling?"

"I would hardly call it a mania. I've been there only twice."

"Do you know anything about this Jason?"

"I've read a few things about him in the newspapers."

Tillman nodded. "He's spent half of his life in prison. Assault, armed robbery—you name it. He's also been picked up on suspicion of murder at least three times, but was always released for lack of evidence."

"Possibly he's a much abused innocent man."

Tillman snorted. "All his murder victims owed him considerable money at the time they met their deaths." He took a sip of his cocktail. "How much have you lost so far?"

"As a matter of fact, I've won twelve thousand dollars."

He absorbed that. "On the other hand, Roger, have you ever considered that being ahead twelve thousand dollars where a man like Jason is concerned might be just as unwise as owing him twelve thousand and being unable to pay? They amount to the same thing, you know. He's out twelve thousand dollars."

"By the way," I said, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention anything about this to Aunt Sarah, even though I'm winning. You know how puritan she is on the subject of gambling."

That night I returned to Jason's Club.

Adrienne McCloskey, as usual, joined me at the roulette table.

After two hours I had lost approximately \$1000. I moved to the blackjack tables and by eleven had managed to lose another \$1000. I prepared to leave.

"How much did you lose?" Adrienne asked.

I shrugged. "Three thousand, I suppose."

She corrected me. "Two thousand."

I smiled. "Oh, well, you can't win all the time."

"No," Adrienne said, "you can't. But you're still ten thousand ahead of the game."

"I'll be back tomorrow night."

At breakfast the next morning Aunt Sarah said, "You seem to have become a night owl. More movies?"

"I'm afraid I've become an addict."

"Well, it's your money. But I understand the admission price these days is outrageous. I can remember when even a downtown theater didn't dare charge more than forty or fifty cents, and that included the tax." She buttered her toast. "I've been thinking about your Wellington invitation."

She was referring to the invitation I had received from Thaddeus Wellington and his wife to spend a few weeks with them on his cattle ranch on the island of Hawaii. Thaddeus had been my roommate at college and until I had met him, I hadn't even been aware that there were cattle ranches on Hawaii, much less huge ones.

Aunt Sarah put down her butter knife. "I've decided that you may go."

"That's very generous of you, Aunt Sarah. You're positive you won't be lonely here?"

"I'll manage."

"How long shall I stay?"

"One week should be enough, I'd think."

After breakfast I phoned our travel agent and made the necessary arrangements for the trip to Hawaii. I decided that I would go near the end of the month.

That night at Jason's Club I lost \$5000.

The next night \$6000, which included my monthly allowance. I was now \$1000 behind the game.

I prepared to leave. "Well, that's that. Thirteen thousand dollars down the drain."

Adrienne had continued to keep track. "Actually you've lost only one thousand dollars of your own money." She smiled encouragingly. "You'll be back tomorrow, of course? Your luck is bound to change."

"I'm afraid not. I'm flat broke."

She couldn't believe that. "Flat broke? How could you be flat broke, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Well, actually I'm not flat broke, I suppose. It's simply that at the moment I just don't have any ready cash. I can't even write out a check. My assets are tied up and I won't be able to lay my hands on cash until the first of next month."

She thought that over. "You *do* live in that big place on the lake front?"

"Why, yes. Wentworths have occupied Cresthill since it was constructed over one hundred years ago."

"And it's all paid for? No mortgage?"

"Of course."

She pursued the subject. "What I mean is, you're not head over heels in debt, or something like that, are you?"

I drew myself up. "My dear woman, I don't owe one cent to any soul on earth and my credit rating is impeccable."

She seemed convinced. "Good. Well, then there's no reason for your fun to be stopped just because you can't put your hands on cash right now. Maybe you could borrow some money?"

"Well, I suppose I could go to some of my friends tomorrow."

"That's not what I meant. Why not ask Jason for a little credit?"

"I've never met the man. Why would he give me credit?"

"I'll vouch for you."

"Do you know Jason?"

She nodded. "I've met him a few times. He's a generous, understanding man."

She left me for the moment and approached Jason, who was lounging at the bar watching his patrons at play. The two of them went into a short conference, then she looked my way and beckoned.

They led me down a narrow corridor to the rear of the club and into a small office.

Jason, who was perhaps in his early forties, smiled. "Mr. Wentworth, Adrienne has explained your situation to me. I'm sure that we can arrange something. Your credit here is good. All you have to do is sign an I.O.U. How much would you like?"

I had never borrowed money before in my life and the process embarrassed me. "Well, I really don't know."

"A thousand? Two? Name it, Mr. Wentworth."

I signed an I.O.U. for \$1000 and got the chips from the cashier. I lost them by eleven. I rose from the blackjack table. "That's it for tonight."

Adrienne had a smile for me. "But you *are* coming back tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Well, is my credit still good?"

"It's good."

Six nights later I owed Jason \$14,000.

In his office again, I said, "Could I possibly borrow just a little bit more?"

He had confidence in my ability to repay. "Name it."

"Would five thousand this time be too much?"

His eyes flickered for just a moment. "Of course not, Mr. Wentworth." He watched me write out the I.O.U. "You *did* say that you'd have cash at the beginning of next month?"

"But of course. On the other hand, I just might not need it. After all, I'm due to hit a winning streak, am I not?"

When I entered his office again on the twenty-fifth of the month, I owed him \$34,000.

Asking for money still embarrassed me. "I was wondering, just how good is my credit? I mean, just how much more may I borrow?"

He brought out and toted up my I.O.U.'s, though I rather suspected that he knew my indebtedness to the penny. "Well, you know how it is, Mr. Wentworth, I don't like my books to get too unbalanced. It's just good business to keep things under control. Not let anybody get in too deep. For their own protection." He glanced at his desk calendar. "I'd say that I could carry you to forty thousand. But that's the limit."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "Somehow I feel lucky tonight, but still I'd like to have enough money to ride out any losing streak I might experience. Could you make that six thousand dollars tonight?"

He wanted to be sure I understood. "The limit?"

"Yes. The limit."

At the roulette table I began winning—some \$5000 before the tide once again turned. By ten thirty I had lost it all, including the \$6000 I had just borrowed from Jason.

I wiped my forehead and then spoke to Adrienne. "Could I see you privately for a few moments?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Good. Perhaps in my car? We could take a drive while I explain something to you."

When we were out on the highway I said, "Adrienne, I feel a bit guilty about what's happened and about what's about to happen, and so I thought I should tell you first. Especially since you so generously vouched for my credit."

Something new appeared in her voice. "Have you got any idea of welshing?"

"Good heavens, no. I fully intend to pay Jason every cent I owe—however, not quite with the alacrity he expects. It will be at the rate of five hundred dollars per month. At the end of six years and eight months I shall have discharged my obligation entirely."

For a few moments there was silence, and then she said, "I thought you were coming into cash the first of the month?"

"I am. However, it isn't quite as much as Jason might have expected. You see, on the first of the month—every first of the month—I receive cash, but it's only one thousand dollars."

She seemed stunned. "A thousand dollars? *One* thousand dollars?"

I nodded. "I am most scrupulous about debts of honor, Adrienne. I think sending perhaps five hundred dollars a month to Jason would be quite equitable. That would leave me with just enough to scrape by."

She began seething. "Hell, I know the Wentworths have got money. I looked it up. What about that big estate and all?"

"Not in my name. Nor is this car."

Her voice rose. "Buster, Jason wants his dough and he wants all of it on the first of the month. Do you know what happens to people who welsh on Jason?"

"Well, I've heard rumors."

"Believe them. Either Jason gets his money or he gets you."

I sighed. "I was afraid of that. Therefore I've had the foresight to make arrangements to disappear. For at least six years and eight

months, during which time Jason will receive five hundred dollars each month as I promised."

She vetoed that immediately. "Not good enough. Wherever you go, Jason will track you down."

"Nonsense. He is only one man who can command the hired services of perhaps two or three violent men. And two or three men can't possibly canvas the surface of this earth in search of one man who will be taking the utmost precautions. The dubious chance of finding me for profitless revenge could easily cost him much more than I owe him. No. I am positive that Jason, once he survives his fury and resorts to reason, will accept patience as his only course."

She gave an order. "Take me back to the club."

I drove back.

She got out of the car. "Wait right here."

But I had no intention of waiting for Jason or anyone else he might send out. As soon as she disappeared into the building I hastily drove off. I continued on to the airport and its parking lot and then carried my two prepacked suitcases into the terminal.

I boarded a plane which took me to San Francisco, where I changed planes and finally disembarked at Hilo in the Hawaiian Islands.

I enjoyed three days with Thaddeus Wellington and his wife before I received a long-distance phone call from Amos Tillman.

He announced that he had some bad news for me. My Aunt Sarah was dead. She had been murdered by some intruder who had broken into the house during the night. The police had, as yet, been unable to apprehend the criminal.

I put down the phone.

Who had killed her? I wondered. Jason? One of his men? Perhaps even Adrienne?

Had it been Jason or Adrienne who had arrived at the conclusion that the only way I could possibly repay my debt with the speed desired was to see to it that I came into money of my own?

I sighed. I would pay Jason as soon as the estate was settled and I would never gamble again. Gambling is for fools. Certainly one cannot count on winning, and, as a matter of fact, there are times when one could not even count on losing, as I had learned during my first two nights at Jason's Club.

I made myself a drink.

It had worked.

If it hadn't, I would, of course, have had to turn to something less devious. But it had worked.

How does one go about finding and hiring a professional killer? Does one advertise in the newspapers? Certainly not. Does one go to one's friends or even to strangers and ask? Not if one is at all wise. There are too many dangers and pitfalls in such approaches. And one always faces the subsequent risk of blackmail or incrimination.

No, the only way to hire a killer is to hire one *who doesn't know he's being hired*.

And how much does that cost?

Well, in my case, \$40,000.



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a NEW Professor Ponsonby story by

ALAN K. YOUNG

Professor Ponsonby, retired these past fourteen years from the English faculty of Briarwood College, has been absent from our pages for too long. His return to EQMM is an auspicious one—the story of a thirty-year-old coded message that has completely baffled experts for three decades—experts who have the use of the most sophisticated code-breaking equipment. And even though thirty years have passed in the kaleidoscope world of international intrigue, it is possible that the importance to our country of that secret message may not have diminished. So leave it to Ponsonby to unravel the seemingly impenetrable secret of a most ingenious code . . .

THE SECRET FATE OF FITCHEW

by ALAN K. YOUNG

To Professor Ponsonby's satisfaction, Richard Bingham appeared to be at least as old as he himself—if not yet an octogenarian, then very close to it. Moreover, in spite of the thin gray hair, the time-lined face, the slow, deliberate walk, there was something about the man—the surprising firmness of his handshake, perhaps, or the no-nonsense look in his steel-gray eyes—that suggested he was still very much in command of his world.

Bingham's voice, too, had a firmness that belied his years. "Did John Logan explain the purpose of my visit?" he asked, when the two men had finished their pleasantries and settled into chairs on opposite sides of Ponsonby's study hearth.

"Only that you had a thirty-year-old coded message that he thought I might be able to help you with," replied Ponsonby. "But since I'm aware of the kind of work Professor Logan was engaged in during the war, I assumed it might have something to do with what the blurb writers would call 'international intrigue.'"

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Bingham's chuckle was dry and crusty. "And thirty years ago you would have been right. Today I'm afraid it doesn't have to do with much of anything but an old man's frustration at still being unable, even after being given a second chance, to get to the bottom of a mystery that's been haunting him for three decades."

"Well, at this moment my fascination must be at least equal to your frustration," said Ponsonby, eyeing the slim, black-leather briefcase his visitor held in his lap. In the 14 years since his retirement from the Briarwood College English faculty, Ponsonby had helped the local police solve a number of challenging cases—a stimulating experience at any time, but never more so than when it involved a code or cipher.

"Then let me sketch in the background of this particular puzzle for you," replied Bingham, reaching down to prop the briefcase against the side of his chair, "and I think you'll find that your interest has not been misplaced. You're right in assuming that John Logan and I met in the O.S.S. during the war. But John had left us and I was back riding a desk in Washington by the time we received this particular message. It was sent to us from Vladivostok, Russia, in June 1946, contained in a weekly newspaper called *The Voice of the West*. The paper had been published for the Anglo-American community over there since a few months after Pearl Harbor, but as it turned out, this was the last issue ever published."

"An English-language newspaper in Vladivostok?" said Ponsonby. "I find that rather surprising."

"Oh, Vladivostok had quite a substantial Anglo-American community during the war. Military liaison people, lend-lease experts, technical advisers of one kind or another. Of course by '46 they were dwindling fast and the paper's days were numbered, but up until then it had still been serving its purpose, so we had kept it going."

"We?"

"The O.S.S. We'd been behind it from the start. The original idea had come from an expatriate Bostonian named Lewellyn Price, who was our top agent in eastern Russia. He was something of a dilettante and a dandy who'd left the States in 1936 to escape the consequences of a rather untidy scandal back in Boston. But he was also a damned fine agent, and since he'd been a journalist by trade, he conceived of a small weekly newspaper as the perfect way to pass information on to Washington. After all, the Russians could hardly object to a little news-from-home publication for their American and British allies, and once a few hundred copies of each issue had

been distributed, we could pretty well count on a few of them getting through to us in the West. Price deliberately held it to a small, seat-of-the-pants sort of operation with no time to spare for such niceties as proofreading, and the prearranged code we used was based on typographic errors and misspelled words deliberately included in each issue."

"Very ingenious," observed Ponsonby. "But why was it necessary to send information in code during the war? After all, the U.S. and Russia were allies—"

"Only nominally, Professor. The so-called Iron Curtain had been in place long before Winston Churchill coined that phrase in March of '46. Even during the war we couldn't get the kind of information we needed out of Russia by means of the regular mails or even the diplomatic pouch, so Lewellyn Price came up with the idea of starting this newspaper.

"He himself was not the code expert, however. That was a Russian named Voronsky, who was the typesetter on the *Voice*. The way it worked, all the information gathered by our field agents in eastern Russia was funneled into Price who would pass it on to Voronsky, and he in turn would incorporate it in our prearranged code in the next issue of the paper. Then when that issue arrived in Washington, our people would go through it line by line, listing all the misspelled words and typographical errors, eliminating those that didn't fit the code, and decoding the rest.

"It worked well, too, up until June of '46 and Lew Price's last message, which undoubtedly was the most important he'd ever tried to send. And then we went and fumbled the ball at our end so that to this day no one has ever read it!" The depth of Bingham's chagrin was apparent in his voice.

Ponsonby frowned. "Then how can you be so certain of its importance?"

"Because of the lengths Price went to to get it out to us. He risked his life putting that message into an amateur code of his own and trying to get a few copies out of the country. Which convinces me that it had to be about Fitchew."

"I beg your pardon?" said Ponsonby, resisting the temptation to add, "Gesundheit."

"Fitchew," repeated Bingham. "One of the most devilishly capable agents the KGB ever had, who that same summer vanished off the face of the earth."

Bingham's suppressed passion started a pulse throbbing in his

temple. It was a few moments before he could continue, controlling his voice with an obvious effort. "The summer of '46 was a rather hectic, confused time for those of us in the business of 'international intrigue,' as you put it. The war in Europe had been over for a year, the war in the Pacific about ten months. The Communists had control of most of China and it was obvious that Chiang's days were numbered, at least on the mainland. Our wartime alliance with Russia was already ancient history, and the Cold War was heating up fast, with Stalin as our new Enemy Number One.

"The events I'm going to tell you about took place in June that year. I was in charge of our Far East desk, and my main concern was this man Fitchew. At least that was the name we all knew him by; his real name was Borodnov, Borodnev, something like that."

"Fitchew," said Ponsonby. "Isn't that a kind of animal?"

"A European polecat" is the dictionary definition, I believe. Although the Europeans don't use the term 'polecat' to mean skunk; I believe it's more like a ferret."

"Good at digging out things?"

"Yes, although in Fitchew's case 'skunk' would have been closer to the mark, because the man's specialty was raising a stink. He was a genius at creating the kind of outrageous propaganda that would make another country look bad, or drive a wedge between friendly nations, or set neutral countries against the West. He was also a master at charming his way into various groups and manipulating them for his own ends—general strikes, student riots, political scandals—at one time or another in his career he'd arranged them all.

"During the war he'd concentrated his activities in Europe, but in the spring of '46 the word was out that he'd transferred his base of operations to Vladivostok and was planning the biggest coup of his career, with the United States as his main target.

"There were dozens of rumors filtering out of Russia and China as to what it would be. The most persistent was that he was planning some sort of monstrous propaganda ploy that would undermine our good name in the Pacific for years to come. One version was that he'd managed to get a leading American diplomat off by himself at Yalta long enough to hypnotize him and program him to assassinate some major world figure when Fitchew gave the signal. Another had it that Fitchew himself had terminal cancer and was going to sacrifice himself in a way that would make anti-American headlines all over the world.

"But there were equally strong rumors that he was going to go underground, take on a new identity, smuggle himself into this country, and establish a major Soviet espionage network on our West Coast.

"The trouble was, we didn't know which if any of these rumors was true. So I put out the word to all our people in the Vladivostok area that it was absolutely imperative, whatever the cost, that they get a line on what Fitchew was up to and let me know. And then he simply up and disappeared!"

"And *was* there any great headline-making event that summer that would have filled the bill for this 'monstrous propaganda ploy' you spoke of?"

"Nothing worthy of Fitchew."

"Then since he disappeared that same spring, isn't it likely that the rumor about his changing his identity and going underground may have been closest to the truth?"

"It would seem so, yes. And yet I can't believe that he could have functioned for very long in this country or anywhere else without our getting *some* wind of him. The man was good, but I can't believe he was *that* good."

"Has it occurred to you that he may have died that summer of natural causes, and that the Russians simply threw all those rumors into the hopper just to get some last mileage out of his name? After all, even spies are mortal."

Bingham dismissed the suggestion with a shrug. "We did consider that possibility, but we discounted it because of another event that took place that same month. Shortly before Fitchew's disappearance the KGB moved against our entire undercover network in the Vladivostok area. On the night of June second they swept up seven of our people, and as fast as they could get one of them to talk—and believe me, they had ways—they went after his contacts. And they did it all as quietly as possible, without making a big propaganda splash out of it.

"Now perhaps you have to have been in the business to realize how unusual that was. But once you've made one of your enemy's agents on your own ground, then other things being equal he's far more valuable to you on the street than he is in jail or in the grave. Take him up and before long he'll be replaced by another agent whose identity you *don't* know. But leave him where he is, and you can watch him, learn from him, find out who his contacts are and feed him false information to pass on to them, all the time making

sure that he doesn't get his hands on any information you *don't* want him to have.

"And the only possible reason for the KGB to have made a sweep like that, sacrificing the advantage they'd gained from having made a number of our people, is if they were planning something of such vital importance that they didn't want to take the slightest chance of its leaking to the West."

"Protecting Fitchew's flanks, as it were, when he made his big move," suggested Ponsonby.

"Exactly. In just five days they pulled in more than half of our people in the Vladivostok area. And one of those they went after in the second wave of arrests was Price's code expert Voronsky. Months later we learned that he'd shot himself on the night of June seventh when the KGB agents were pounding on his door; most likely he did it to protect Lew Price, because he knew the KGB would force Price's name out of him in a matter of hours. In any event, his suicide gave Price the time he needed to get out that last issue of the *Voice*.

"I've often thought what a hell of a time Lew Price had those next few days. He must have worked around the clock, devising a spur-of-the-moment code to get his message into the *Voice* without arousing the suspicions of whatever substitute typesetter he'd managed to hire. Or maybe he even set the type himself. But obviously he was hoping against hope that if he could just get that one last issue into distribution, somehow or other a copy would find its way out to the West. He must have known that the odds were against his living long enough to find out if he'd succeeded, and yet he was willing to try because the information he had was so important!" Bingham fell silent, staring into the empty fireplace.

After a moment Ponsonby said softly, "And what information could possibly have been of such great importance in the summer of '46 except the plans of Agent Fitchew?"

"I'm convinced of it," said Bingham emphatically. "The KGB did confiscate that last issue soon after it was distributed, but they weren't able to round up all the copies and one of them *was* smuggled out to us several months later. By then we knew that Voronsky was dead and Price had disappeared, but we didn't know the circumstances. And because that last issue of the *Voice* had been published a week after the KGB sweep began, we were certain it contained an important message for us. But when our experts went over it, although they did find plenty of typos, even more than usual,

they didn't find any that fit into our code.

"That convinced us that Price had had to get out the paper without Voronsky's help, and that any message it contained must be in some kind of amateur code that he'd made up on his own. So they went over it again and came up with two items that didn't make sense unless they *were* part of a code. One was a box on page five, supposedly a cryptogram, containing fifteen meaningless groups of letters. Now Price did run a cryptogram in every issue—an adage, a quotation from literature, something like that—but we discovered that these fifteen groups of letters weren't cryptograms for any known words in English or any other language.

"The second inexplicable item was another box on the next page containing the names of thirty-six British and American companies, each one followed by a number that supposedly was the price of its stock, but that actually bore no relation to the real price of that stock. So we decided that, taken together, those two items added up to some sort of amateur code that Price had dreamed up on his own. They both were items that some hastily hired typesetter would not have found suspicious, and that even the KGB experts who doubtless went over every issue might not have spotted immediately.

"So we put our best people to work on them, using the most sophisticated code-breaking equipment we had, but even after weeks of effort we hadn't been able to break Price's code. Which convinced me that we were still missing something, a third element, probably another item in the paper. But try as we might, we couldn't find anything else that seemed relevant. So as time passed and nothing extraordinary occurred that looked as if it could be Fitchew's work, the matter was shoved farther and farther back on the shelf until finally it was filed away and forgotten. By everyone but me, that is, and by that time I had been put out to pasture."

"But I take it," said Ponsonby, glancing again at the briefcase beside Bingham's chair, "that something happened rather recently that gave you new hope of solving it?"

"Yes, it did, thanks to the fact that we're now on speaking terms with Red China. About two months ago our State Department arranged for a group of Midwestern farmers to visit over there on one of these information-exchanging junkets, and one of the stops on their itinerary was a small farming village called Kungsien, up near the Russian border, about a hundred miles southwest of Vladivostok. And while they were there, the village fathers—as a kind of token of renewed cooperation, I suppose—presented them with

the ashes of an American who had died there of pneumonia the day after he'd turned up on their doorstep back in June of '46."

"Lewellyn Price?"

"No doubt about it. They had his wallet and passport and a copy of the *Voice* with a note on it in his handwriting. I can guess what happened.

"After he'd gotten out that last issue of the *Voice*, he'd tried to make a run for it and had somehow managed to get across the border to China, but somewhere along the line he caught pneumonia and he arrived in Kungsien a dying man. But the Communists took over that area very soon after that, probably before the village elders could make contact with any American officials. And then most likely they were afraid that if they mentioned the incident to their new overlords, they'd be accused of having harbored an enemy of China, so they just kept quiet about it. But the Chinese are a very methodical people with great respect for the dead, so they didn't destroy Price's effects, they simply shoved them away in a corner of the town hall or whatever they call it over there, and there they've been ever since."

"Remarkable," murmured Ponsonby.

"In any event," continued Bingham, "the farmers passed the items on to State and State gave them to the CIA and the CIA looked them over and decided there was nothing to be gained from trying to decode a thirty-two-year-old message and so lost interest again. All except for one young friend of mine—at least, I still think of him as young, a protégé of mine actually, back in the early '50's—who remembered my interest in the case and sent the paper to me. And there, across the top of page one, is the clue I needed all along to find that third element—a simple handwritten note: 'Thought you might be interested in my movie review, page 8.'"

"Like a voice from the grave," said Ponsonby.

"A miracle!" said Bingham. "An old man's one last chance to get to the bottom of a mystery that's haunted him for thirty years. Only today, blast it, I have about as much clout with the Company as a damp rag.

"I've argued and pleaded with them, but they just can't spare the brains or budget or computer time to try to decode a message that could hardly have any relevance to anything going on today. They're just too busy, they tell me, I'll have to work it out on my own. But codes and ciphers were never my strong point, and I haven't been able to get to first base with this one. Maybe in due time I could

talk the Company into having a shot at it, but at my age who knows how much time I have?"

"Is there anything unusual about this movie review which you believe to be the missing element in Price's code?"

"Not that I can see. It *sounds* like Price, and he did run reviews of the movies that played weekends at the Anglo-American Hall—that was a kind of social gathering place for the British and Americans in Vladivostok during the war and for a year or so after. Ironically, this is a review of an espionage movie called *Confidential Agent* that played there several weekends back in June of '46; I managed to confirm that. But I can't find anything out of the ordinary about the review itself, which makes it all the more unlikely that Price would want to call someone's attention to it. Unless, of course, it had something to do with his message. My guess is that he was trying to reach a city in China that was still in the hands of the nationalists so he could mail that copy of the *Voice* to Washington, in case none of the others got through."

"But death and the Communists intervened," said Ponsonby softly. "Well, sir, although I can't promise anything, I'm more than willing to try my hand at it. But I find I'm much better at that sort of thing in the mornings, so could you leave it with me—?"

"Certainly," said Bingham. "And if you *should* manage to break it, Professor, whatever the hour—"

"I'll phone you immediately," promised Ponsonby, as Richard Bingham reached down for his briefcase.

Seated next morning at his breakfast table, the dishes cleared away, a tablet and fresh pencils at hand, Ponsonby carefully spread *The Voice of the West* for June 11, 1946, out before him. The paper was tan and brittle, beginning to pull apart at the folds and to flake here and there around the edges, but it was still entirely legible. So, too, was the handwritten note scrawled across the top of page one, calling attention to the movie review.

The front page carried a smattering of news from England and America—the celebration of the King's birthday in London, a major hotel fire in Chicago, President Truman's threat to draft the striking railroad workers—nothing earthshaking. But it wasn't the news items Ponsonby was interested in, and he quickly turned in search of the bogus cryptogram.

He found it spread across two columns in the lower left-hand corner of page 5:

This Week's Cryptogram

FWH SFLC RDDT SPT JEEHO NBDS PVEFRB IBBT GSE.

WLLDS PIOFTAA TKL EYGOTCWTO DHT OSKAIUSFG.

*Answer to Last Week's Cryptogram***"THE BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS OF ALL HUMAN
UNDERTAKINGS ARE UNTIDY."** — John Galsworthy

He studied the cryptogram for several minutes, then turned his attention to another small box, headed *Last Week's Market Leaders*, which occupied a single column near the top of page 6. Ignoring the 36 companies, all well-known American or British corporations, he concentrated instead on the 36 numbers set opposite them down the length of the column:

63 29 2.00 1.97 2 5/7 206 87 2.21 2 2/7

43 52 2.42 3 19 2 6/7 1 1/6 1.49 53

2.43 2 1/2 57 42 1.90 192 2.61 1.22 2 1/6

1.68 163 18 2 1/3 49 84 2 3/8 131 2.79

He spent a few moments studying the numbers, then turned in search of the movie review. Page 8 carried the continuation of several page one stories, several announcements about coming attractions (a square dance, a bridge tournament, a lecture on retirement planning) at the Anglo-American Hall, and a large photograph of General MacArthur and Japanese Emperor Hirohito in the back of an open limousine. The review was spread over two columns in the upper right-hand corner under the headline: *BOYER, BACALL STAR IN ESPIONAGE THRILLER*. It carried the byline of Lewellyn Price.

Ponsonby read it through slowly.

"In a century marked by two world wars, when espionage has become as familiar as bread, it is not surprising that films featuring the good guys versus the bad guys down on the spying range are emerging from Western studios like ants at a picnic. Their basic plot is fast becoming hoary with repetition, spread as thin as pancakes from a dieter's kitchen. But in the capable hands of Director Herman Shumlin, Warner Brothers' *Confidential Agent* blazes enough new ground to set it apart from its more run-of-the-thrill counterparts.

"Based on a Graham Greene novel, this film is set in London in 1937. Charles Boyer is a Spanish Loyalist soldier who has come to England to stop a cargo of vital coal from reaching Franco's blast furnaces. He is fortyish, graying, and far from brave, but he pursues his goal with a dogged intensity, and Destiny rewards his persistence by crossing his path with Lauren Bacall, a sultry-voiced free spirit who becomes his friend indeed and danger. Peter Lorre, Katina Paxinou, and Victor Francen also are on hand as a trio of Falangist agents, as callous a crew of villains as ever danced attendance on Satan.

"Shumlin knows well how to whip up the froth of suspense; fear heats up, tensions mount as the Fascist assassins hunt Boyer through the foggy London nights. And enough of the Graham Greene genius has been woven into the fabric of this film to give it a degree of social significance and occasional moments of worthwhile repartee.

"Those with the price of a ticket and a liking for cloak-and-dagger daring are well advised to make a beeline for the Anglo-American Hall this weekend."

Ponsonby read it through a second time, even more slowly. Then he leaned back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at the paper. So there you are, he thought: a bogus cryptogram, a bogus stock list, a genuine movie review. And hidden among the three, and their relationship to each other, was the fate of Agent Fitchew.

Late that afternoon, looking back on his morning's effort while awaiting the arrival of Richard Bingham, Ponsonby was annoyed that it had taken him so long. But that, he told himself, had been due to the numbers; he was a word man, through and through, and numbers had always given him trouble.

Only after puzzling over them for almost an hour had it suddenly occurred to him that in all likelihood Lewellyn Price had not been a numbers man either. Price had been a dilettante, Bingham had said, even something of a dandy, and who ever heard of a dilettante-dandy who could do fractions? What more likely, then, than that Price had intended the numbers to be regarded simply as numbers, and had added the decimal points to some and divided others into fractions merely as camouflage, to try to make them appear more like stock prices, at least to a non-capitalist eye? Thus, 1.97 was actually 197; $2\frac{5}{7}$ simply 257.

If that were so, then what he had was simply a list of 36 numbers, ranging from 3 to 279, in staggered order. And since he also had a

movie review which appeared to contain at least that many words, what more likely than that Price had intended the numbers to identify 36 specific words, to be extracted from the review in the order that their corresponding numbers appeared in the list of bogus stock prices?

The theory, moreover, had a further consideration to recommend it, something that, in spending so long on the numbers, he had been in danger of overlooking. Obviously, Lewellyn Price had devised his amateur code under tremendous pressure; he must have known that his freedom, perhaps even his life, was being measured in hours rather than days, yet he had set himself a monumental task: to devise his code, to incorporate it in various items in the paper, to have them set in type and make sure they contained no misleading errors, to get the rest of the paper assembled and on and off the press and into distribution. As Bingham had surmised, he must have worked around the clock for several days, hoping against hope that Fate would give him the time he needed. Obviously, *simplicity* had to be the chief characteristic of his code.

At this point Ponsonby had opened his tablet and carefully copied out the review, leaving several spaces between the lines. Next he had numbered each word, and finally he had extracted those words which corresponded to the numbers in Price's list of bogus stock prices. When he had finished, he had stared in dismay at the message before him:

KITCHEN BAD SATAN DANCED REPARTEE WHIP MORE
HUNT NIGHTS AT HOARY THIS CENTURY NOT LIKING COME
DESTINY WITH FILM FEAR THIN ANTS CALLOUS CREW
PRICE CARGO MOUNT FRIEND FREE IS HEATS IS APART
INTO HE BEELINE.

His discouragement, however, had lasted only a few moments. "Simplicity!" he had exclaimed out loud, and turned to the bogus cryptogram. And simplicity, in this instance, must surely mean that Price had intended the letters to be regarded simply as letters, and had arranged them into arbitrary groups merely to give them the *appearance* of a cryptogram. Again he had begun to count the number of letters in the cryptogram and a few moments later had written a large bold 72 on a blank page of his tablet.

He was certain now that he had it. The connection was obvious: 72 letters and 36 words—or two letters to each word.

And indeed, with an assist from John Galsworthy—"beginnings and endings"—thoughtfully provided by the ingenious Mr. Price, it was an easy step from there to the solution. And so Ponsonby had decoded the 33-year-old message describing the "monstrous propaganda ploy" which the notorious Fitchew had planned for the summer of '46.

Good lord! he thought when he had finished. How could such a tragedy have been kept out of the headlines all these years? Surely we would have heard something! Bingham had *said* that Fitchew had vanished off the face of the earth, but obviously he had been speaking figuratively; he could never have guessed that that description was, in all likelihood, very close to the truth.

"It was simply a matter of dividing the 72 letters into groups of two and substituting those two letters for the first and last letters of each word in the secret message. The quote from Galsworthy was intended to suggest that course of action, but it was scarcely necessary. As soon as I matched the first two letters with the first word in the message, the solution leaped out at me. And so I substituted F and W for K and N, and KITCHEN became FITCHEW, and so on throughout the message. Then it was merely a matter of adding the appropriate punctuation."

It was an hour later and Richard Bingham again sat across a blazing study hearth from Ponsonby. "Boris X," he murmured, shaking his head in wonder over the decoded message which he now held in his hand. "And it never even occurred to me!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Ponsonby.

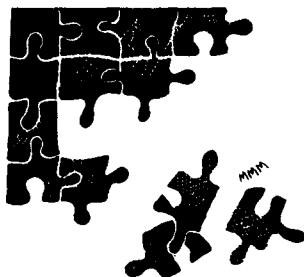
"Boris X," repeated Bingham, "the captain of the *Venture*. She was a three-masted sailing ship out of Hong Kong, under charter to some obscure Japanese peace group. There were—I believe it was sixty—young people on board from almost every nation in the Pacific, some in their twenties, a few teenagers, but a lot of them still just children. It was the last ship our Navy turned away from the area before the first test—that was the one from the air, on July first, as I recall. They left willingly enough once they understood the danger they were in, especially because their captain, who'd been the only Caucasian on board, had died and been buried at sea two days before. Apparently he'd been the brains *and* the inspiration behind their protest, because with him gone they didn't seem to have much heart for it. And of course *they'd* never intended that it should involve them in any real danger.

"And yet in spite of their dependence on the man, they didn't seem to know much about him. They told us he'd apparently come with the ship, they'd been told to call him Boris, and from the start he'd obviously been a sick man. In any event, he went down in our records simply as Boris X, and the whole episode was filed away and forgotten."

Bingham sighed, and again shook his head in disbelief. "A very minor incident, really. And to think that all those years, while I was fretting about what sort of monstrous mischief Fitchew might be up to, he was lying dead on the bottom of the Pacific!"

He reached out and let the tablet page on which Ponsonby had written the decoded message drift gently down into the fire. The flames reached up to greet it, caught one corner, then another, and slowly Lewellyn Price's final message disappeared from view:

FITCHEW HAS FATAL CANCER. DEPARTED THIS PORT JUNE EIGHTH ON BOARD SHIP VENTURE FOR BIKINI BOMB TESTING SITE. WILL LEAD SHIP INTO FALLOUT AREA, TRICK LARGE YOUNG ORIENT CREW TO DEATH TO SPARK ANTI-U.S. FEELING.



CLERIHEWS

by JACQUES BARZUN

John Dickson Carr
Would rather, by far,
Be shot in a locked-and-barred room
Than play bridge in the card room.

Dorothy L. Sayers'
Plots come in layers:
She makes sure the feats of P. Wimsey
Don't look flimsy.

Dashiell Hammett
Cried, "God damn it!"—
All because the Continental Op
Had a flop.

Arthur Conan Doyle
Burned the midnight oil
Inventing a Holmicide party
Named Moriarty.

Dame Ngaio Marsh
Could be rather harsh:
She'd never let Roderick Alleyn
Drink Scotch by the gallon.

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a **NEW** short story by

THOMAS WALSH

Henry Potter based his entire future—and Abbie's—on the word of old Mr. Killeen, owner of the Bon Ton Department Store in North Pequanset, New Hampshire, and never for a moment did Potter doubt his employer's word . . . Not a cop story this time, but Thomas Walsh's heart is as big as ever . . .

OLD KILLEEN'S PROMISE

by **THOMAS WALSH**

Henry Potter worked for 46 years, the only job he ever had, as bookkeeper, and then in time as head bookkeeper, for the Bon Ton Department Store in his hometown of North Pequanset, New Hampshire. All that time he never received what could be called a princely salary, and on one or two occasions he might have bettered himself considerably. But he was New England born and bred, with a wary inward conviction that it was probably better to be safe than sorry, and only once did he broach the subject of leaving to old Mr. Killeen, whom he liked and respected very much, as old Mr. Killeen did Henry.

"Now, I'm sorry to hear that," old Mr. Killeen said, peering up at Henry over his spectacles. "Another offer, eh? Well, I don't know if you'd be doing the right thing or not. I've always thought of you as a very valued friend and employee, Henry. I've come to depend on you very much, and never once have you let me down. I have to admit to you right off that I can't match the offer you've got. As you know, business isn't too good at the moment. All I could do—how much more is it that these other people would offer you? \$1500 a year, did you say?"

Henry had a long and Gothic New England face, and long and

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slender New England fingers. Now the fingers clasped together the front of his worn alpaca coat, and he shifted an obviously distressed glance to the office window behind old Mr. Killeen. Henry never liked to push himself forward in any way, but for once his ingrained New England thriftiness—\$1500 a year, after all—set up in him a certain stubborn determination.

"That's right, Mr. Killeen, sir. I'd hate to leave here, too, but what I cal'clate, in fairness to me and Abbie, is I just about have to. I'm very sorry, Mr. Killeen. A chance like this, though—"

"Sit down," old Mr. Killeen said, and removed his spectacles. "I think before you make any decision, you ought to look at this business all around, Henry. What about your pension benefits, for one thing? How old are you now?"

"Forty-seven," Henry said. "And you've always been very good to me, Mr. Killeen, sir. It isn't that. It's just—"

"Forty-seven," old Mr. Killeen said, stroking his white mustache thoughtfully. "Which means you have eighteen years to go before retirement, Henry. Now this isn't company policy, but when the time comes, and if you stay with us, I'd see to it that you went out of here on half pay. You'd better consider that, too. What would your pension be in this new job? In most cases, there has to be twenty-five or even thirty years' service before any retirement benefits at all are paid out. Checked on that part, have you?"

And Henry, who had not, found out the next day that old Mr. Killeen had known what he was talking about, and at home that night he went over the whole thing with his wife, Abbie, from start to finish. He had a dry and precise bookkeeper's mind, and drew up a balance sheet on the back page of Abbie's household-accounts book.

With the new people, receiving \$1500 a year more, he would receive a total of \$27,000 in 18 years. Against that, no pension. With the Bon Ton, on the other hand, when he retired at 65, and granted two or three small increases over the years, he would have an assured retirement income of about \$4000, in addition to his Social Security.

"And we better cal'clate," he told Abbie, "that the Potters are a mighty long-lived family, Mother. Look at Aunt Susan and Uncle Nathaniel, for instance. Both over eighty-five years old, and still sound as a dollar. No sensible reason why I shouldn't go along that far—and \$4000 a year for twenty years makes a grand total of \$80,000. Which means I'd do \$53,000 better than with these other

people, and our Social Security. So all in all, we could count on at least \$8000 a year coming in, safe and secure."

"And without touching even a penny of our capital," Abbie marveled. She was New England also, and like Henry believed that anyone who spent as much as a dollar of capital was beyond the pale. "It seems too good to be true. Are you sure your figures are right?"

Henry rechecked even more carefully, while Abbie set out their usual bedtime treat of hot cocoa and homemade brownies. She was a slender, rather frail woman, with severe arthritis of the right hand and arm, and though she never complained about it, Henry knew only too well how she suffered.

"Yep, \$8000 a year," he repeated, having finished the second go-round. "Right down there in black and white, Mother. Means we could live anywhere we wanted to live, even in Florida."

"Oh, Mr. Potter," Abbie breathed, that being invariably her one form of address for him. "Do you really mean it? Just think of sunshine every day of the year, and our own nice airy little place, and no more ice or snow or cold weather. Oh, Mr. Potter!"

At which Henry, with a rather audible sniff to show her how silly and emotional she was about Florida, nevertheless made up his mind. He had Abbie, anyway, if not much else in the world, and if she wanted Florida for them after all she had done for him in his life . . . Without saying a word to her he made up his mind then and there, and the next day he and old Mr. Killeen shook hands on it.

"I feel that you're doing the right thing," old Mr. Killeen encouraged him, "and I'm very glad to see that you are, Henry. Florida is going to be a grand place for you and Abbie. Just think of it. Nothing to do but sit around in the sun for the rest of your days, both of you. I'm very glad that we have it all settled. Half pay from us the day you turn sixty-five, Henry, and you have my word on it."

Which satisfied Henry, because in his whole life old Mr. Killeen's word had always been as good as his bond. It would be more sensible for anyone who knew him to question that the sun would come up again in the east than to doubt a promise made by old Mr. Killeen. So Henry stayed on at the Bon Ton, though thinking with a certain wistfulness now and again of all that extra \$1500 a year would have meant to him. But in the end the Bon Ton would be the better choice, and after turning 64 he and Abbie began to spend many contented evenings around their little iron stove, examining pamphlets and descriptive folders from various Florida retirement communities.

His last year at the Bon Ton seemed to go by in almost a flash, and every night he came home he could hear Abbie humming to herself *The Old Rugged Cross*, or *Work, For the Night Is Coming*.

"How's the hand?" Henry would ask dourly. It would never do to let her think he was concerned about it. "Is it troubling you today, Mother?"

"Only a little," Abbie would say, which was her invariable answer to that question, also. "Dr. Barnes thinks it's mostly the climate we have up here. He says Florida should help me, the sunshine and all. Sometimes I can hardly wait, Mr. Potter. Just six months now. Oh, I know we're going to be so happy down there!"

"Now, now," Henry reproved. "No silly blather, Mother. Same as any place else, I reckon. Moderate your words. And we're not down there yet. Say nothing, and saw wood. We've six months to go still."

But Henry was very happy, too, particularly so as old Mr. Killeen reaffirmed the promise about the pension on what proved to be his deathbed. One day Henry went out to the house with some papers for Mr. Killeen to sign, and although he would never have had the bad manners to mention it under those circumstances, Mr. Killeen himself brought it up. Very worn now, very ill with a heart condition, he grasped Henry's hand in his thin shaking one, and spoke to young Mr. Killeen at the foot of the bed.

"Dear old Henry," he said. "Walter, I never knew a man I trusted more, or respected more. When do you retire, Henry?"

"In the fall," Henry told him. "The end of October, Mr. Killeen. Six months."

"Then don't think I've forgotten what I promised you," old Mr. Killeen said. "I want you and Abbie to enjoy Florida. You deserve it, Henry, and you're going to get it. I meant to talk to you about this before, Walter. Because if anything happens to me I want you to be sure that—"

"Now, Dad," young Mr. Killeen said. "None of that talk. You're going to be up and around in no time, so don't worry about Henry. There's no need."

"No need at all," Henry put in. "You've been very generous to me all my life, sir. Very good."

"As you've been to the Bon Ton," old Mr. Killeen said, gripping his hand feebly. "Thank you, Henry. And don't worry. I'll arrange everything with Walter here after my nap. Come back and see me next Monday. I'll have it all properly settled for you."

But he never woke up from the nap, and unfortunately young Mr.

Killeen turned out to be a much different type of man from old Mr. Killeen. After the funeral young Killeen went down to Boston for a week, and when he came back he brought along an elegant blonde secretary to replace Mrs. Bradford. She got twice the salary, as Henry discovered from the checks he sent out, and in her second week she charged a fur coat and a sports runabout to young Killeen's account. Henry tightened his lips at that, but loyalty to old Mr. Killeen kept him from telling anyone at all, even Abbie.

For himself, after the estate was probated, young Killeen sold off some of his father's utility stocks and bought himself a new Piper Cub, a \$24,000 motorboat, and a ski chalet up around Mount Washington, where he began spending longer and longer weekends with Hazel Sampson, the new secretary. One day he rode up in the office elevator with Henry, but he failed to realize that he was not alone, even after Henry said good morning to him. He looked up blankly, as if at the wall, and then, humming to himself, adjusted his tie very carefully in the small mirror. So things were not in any respect as they had been with old Mr. Killeen, and Henry was very glad that his time at the Bon Ton was coming to an end very soon.

In late summer that year, having decided on their dream house, Henry and Abbie made a down payment on a small Florida home so that, come November, everything would be all ready for them. About that time, too, Henry, who was always very orderly and methodical in his habits, handed over the new Florida address to his brother-in-law, Russell Carpenter, the Bon Ton general manager. Russell, stout and jovial, had been a paratrooper in the Korean War, and Henry considered him, not quite approvingly, as a complete man of the world. Two or three times a month he had been observed going into one of the state liquor stores; he never really used up his automobiles, but traded them in every two years; and once a disreputable friend of his down in Boston, someone named Chips McGinty, whose life Russell had saved in Korea, had given him a tip on a horse race through which Russell had won \$1300. He had wanted Henry to bet too, but Henry would not. He would as soon have agreed to spending his capital. Henry Potter a gambler?

"So it's off to Florida for you and Abbie, eh?" Russell asked cheerfully. "You're a sly old dog, Henry. Never thought you were that well fixed. But all the luck in the world to you. Hit a hundred down there, old boy, and let's hear from you once in a while."

"Oh, yes," Henry assured him. "Reckon a lot of people are a sight too careless about their mail, Russell. But every month, soon as you

send me my pension check, I'll let you know that I got it safely. Only businesslike thing to do. Then neither of us will have to worry about it."

"Your pension check?" Russell said, looking a bit startled at first, then uneasy. "You mean from the Bon Ton here? I don't know a thing about that, Henry. Perhaps you better go in and check it out this morning with young Mr. Killeen."

But the blonde secretary did not appear to know Henry, either, and was obviously much annoyed at having to interrupt buffing her nails.

"Some old man," she snapped into the intercom. "Parker or something. Want to see him, hon?"

And in old Mr. Killeen's office, which was all new and shingly modernistic now, Walter was keenly absorbed in a copy of *The Wall Street Journal*, every inch the executive. He had also begun investing in stocks lately, and now put through at least eight or ten transactions a month, buy or sell.

"Yes?" he said, hardly glancing up from the paper. "What is it, Potter? What do you want?"

"It's about my pension," Henry told him, finding that he had to brace himself for some reason. "I just spoke to Russell about it, and he thought I should speak to you."

"Your what?" young Killeen said, running down another column of stocks, and then throwing the paper aside in some temper. "Look. We don't happen to be IBM around here, Potter. What are you talking about?"

Something jolted itself loose in Henry's chest, but the thought of Abbie flew through his mind, and it made him fight.

"I think you know," he declared a bit more loudly and tightly than he wanted to. "Years ago your father promised me that if I agreed to stay on here—"

"Agreed to stay on here?" young Killeen repeated as if incredulously. "Why, you damned silly old dodderer. I'd have got rid of you ten years ago. All Dad ever said that way was something about Florida. You know as well as I do that pensions to our employees was never company policy here. And now you come in to me and talk as if—Dad give you anything in writing?"

Suddenly the office seemed very small to Henry, suffocatingly small. It was necessary to grip the desk in order to steady himself.

"I thought that I had something better than writing," he said, his heart lurching a second time. "Your father's word, sir. Years ago,

when I got an offer from those people over in Manchester, he told me that he couldn't match it, but that if I stayed here he'd see that I went out on half pay when the time came. A man like your father didn't have to put it in writing—but I expect you to honor his wishes, Mr. Killeen. I deserve it. I was promised it. And all these years I've been counting on it."

"Have you?" young Killeen said, getting up coolly. "Don't try the sympathy line on me, Potter. I won't go for it. I'm not a damned fool. Don't think you can maneuver me around the way you did Dad. He kept you on all these years because he felt sorry for you—and this is the way you try to repay him?"

Henry, long face bleakly set—oh, Abbie, Abbie—glanced numbly at him across the desk.

"No, no, no," young Killeen said, brushing it all aside with a great-man-of-affairs gesture. But then, it came to Henry, he was probably feeling the pinch a little. Hazel the secretary was quartered in the newest and most expensive highrise in town, while young Killeen's personal checks the last month, as Henry also knew from the bank statement, were running about \$600 a week, even in North Pequanset. Very likely, it had become necessary to slow things down a little, and where better to start than Henry?

"So it won't work," young Killeen said, curling his lips openly. "You've either got something in writing, Potter, or else you haven't. If you have, show it to me. If you haven't, get out of here and stop wasting my time."

Henry, feeling a sudden rush of hot physical nausea, could only turn quickly, not to let young Killeen see any of that. But when he had closed the office door after him, he paused numbly for a minute or so, still holding the knob. Florida gone—and probably the deposit on the dream house also gone. All Abbie would have from now on were the bleak and everlasting New Hampshire winters, because there would be nothing for both of them but the monthly Social Security check. He rested his shoulders against the wall, felt a miserably helpless shiver go up his spine, and closed his eyes. How could he tell her? He had promised that he would give her the one thing she had ever asked from him, and now he could not. Oh, Mother!

Russell came along the hall.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Henry rolled tormented gray eyes at him, and shook his head silently.

"Dirty rotten little cur," Russell gritted, glaring past Henry at the office door. "Don't bother telling me, Henry. I was afraid of this. Damn it to hell!"

"But it's not fair," Henry whispered distractedly. "It's not right. Old Mr. Killeen did promise me. Half pay, he said—when the time came. How can I explain it to Abbie, Russell?"

"Come on out to lunch," Russell said. "I'm going to buy you a drink, Henry. You look like you need one."

But even two unaccustomed martinis at lunch, altogether unique for Henry, failed to help. He told the whole story to Russell, who got a hard shiny glint in his eyes listening to it.

"Damned little welsher," he muttered. "But what can we do, Henry? He's living it up high, wide, and handsome—and the hell with the way you'll live."

"But how could he do it?" Henry whispered again. "Old Mr. Killeen told him that day. And still—it wouldn't even mean anything important to him. He's spending his capital, Russell. Only last week he sold off some more utilities stock from his father's estate—\$36,000. And he owes me that money. He owes it! The thing just isn't fair."

"The boy plunger of Wall Street," Russell sneered. "That's how he sees himself now. Buy and sell, buy and sell, because he thinks it makes him a big man—and losing his shirt every week. But I wouldn't tell Abbie just yet. Let me talk to him, Henry. It won't help, I suppose, but let me try, anyway. He does owe you that pension, by all that's fair, and the damn little cur knows it as well as we do."

But Russell could not help. Young Killeen dismissed him as curtly as he had dismissed Henry, and he had the law on his side. There was no written agreement—and so there would be no pension. Saturday afternoon Russell invited Henry to drive down to Boston with him, and broke the news. Then he glanced at Henry's averted face, and clenching and unclenching his hands, Russell compressed his lips. Later, after he had done his shopping in Boston, he took Henry to see Chips McGinty.

"Called that," he explained in the elevator, "because he was always in them, one way or another. Could bet you on cards, dice, or your own mother's maiden name—and always win. Used to be able to think up an angle on anything at all. Maybe he can on this too. Might as well ask."

"Eh?" Henry said, thoughts wandering wretchedly.

"Oh, nothing," Russell said, giving him a quick, sidewise look.

Henry was about the most moral man he knew. "Talking to myself, I guess. Here's our floor, Henry."

And meeting with Chips McGinty was another new experience for Henry. Chips was a thin brisk man, very quick in movement, and snappily dressed. A wise, knowing grin marked his lips, even in repose, and he had a habit of giving you a nod and a wink, as though there was something understood and extremely confidential between you, with everything he said. He smoked cigarettes one after another, and addressed Henry from the first moment as Pal. A great many people trooped in and out of his office, and to Henry they all looked like extraordinary people.

There was a very stout man, referred to as Fat Joey, who spoke with an impressive Oxford accent, and wore a fur-trimmed impresario's overcoat. There was a wisp of a man, Spook, who sidled in, whispered hoarsely and mysteriously in Chips's ear, and sidled out again. Then there was another man to whom Chips tossed over three brand-new one-hundred dollar bills as if they were so much waste paper, and when the man was putting away that money in his wallet Henry caught sight of what looked like a policeman's badge on the inner flap.

"So we're all set for Tuesday night now," Chips said, tipping him the wink this time. "You took care of the watchman?"

"No trouble," the policeman said, after studying Henry and Russell for a moment with guarded stolidity. "Dandy Donovan's first cousin, Chips. You got the truck ready?"

"Out in Dorchester," Chips nodded. "What do you figure we should ring up?"

"Somewhere around twenty big ones," the policeman said. "Guarantee it. All latest model sets, and all in color."

"Then drop by Wednesday morning," Chips said. "I'll hit you again if it works out that way."

The phone rang and rang, and once Chips went into a passionate rage with somebody about if-money, whatever that was. A tearful blonde girl, prettier even than Hazel Sampson, was advised to get in touch with Feeley the shyster, and after she left, the reception clerk ushered in a tiny and sad-faced old nun.

"Here's Drunken Flossie," he told Chips. "Wants to see you a minute."

"So how you making out?" Chips greeted her. "You do yourself any good at the ball game last night?"

"Could have," the nun said bitterly, lighting a cigarette for herself,

pouring out half a glass of Chips's whiskey, and hiking her skirts up so high around the begging tray in her lap that Henry blushed and looked aside. "We win in the ninth, Chips, so everybody feels real good. I'd a made thirty, forty dollars, maybe, only that crud Jack O'Mara spots me over by Grandstand Admissions, and I had to get lost."

"Getting a lot of complaints about him," Chips sympathized. "Looks like I'll have to do something."

"I can tell you what I'd like to do," the nun said, and amazed Henry by declaring, in the bluntest possible terms, where Jack O'Mara ought to be kicked.

"Well, yeah," Chips said, "if he got any. He never learns, that guy. Okay, Flossie. I'll see if I can't have him put back pounding a beat again."

"Wish he was pounding a beat down in hell," the nun muttered, and again shocked Henry beyond words by adding something to the effect that Jack O'Mara was a divinely condemned, physically unclean, markedly malodorous descendant of unmarried parents. Henry had always been a bit wary of priests and brothers, but he would never have expected that kind of language even from a nun.

Then there was someone named Three-to-One O'Connor, who seemed furious as a mad hornet, all because he had met a friend of his last night and had invited the friend in for a drink at Pat Kehoe's place.

"Closing time," he said grimly, "so there he was totting up at the end of the bar. 'Evenin', Pat,' I says. 'The usual for me, I guess, and rye with a beer chaser for my friend, Mr. McCarthy.' He just keeps adding. 'Go back to wherever you got your load on tonight,' he tells me. 'I ain't serving you. You're both drunk already.' " Rage shook him. "The embarrassment of it," he said, appealing to Russell. "Inviting a friend to have a drink with me and gettin' that kind of treatment. I want his license suspended for thirty days, Chips. Who do I see?"

But at last they were left alone and Russell explained about Henry's pension.

"Yeah, yeah," Chips said, glancing at Henry. "Want this fellow chastised, do you? That it?"

"No, nothing like that," Russell put in hastily. "Thought maybe you could hit on an angle, Chips. Henry deserves that pension. He earned it, and he was promised it. But what can we do?"

"Tell you," Chips said, having heard enough, apparently. "When

I got out of the service I did a job with old Louis Thatcher, who was the best front man you ever saw, next to Fat Joey. He knew this fellow in Wellesley Hills who had all the money in the world, but had never earned a nickel of it. So what we doped out, to kind of even things up a little—"

"Henry," Russell interrupted, "go down and check on the parking meter, will you? I can't remember whether I put in anything or not, and if I didn't, they might hook me for twenty-five dollars down here."

Which of course they would have, Henry told himself. City people for you. But the parking meter was still good for half an hour, and when he got back upstairs he could hear Russell laughing out in the hall. Inside, Chips had the tight grin on his face, and when he saw Henry, gave him the wink.

"But one thing," Russell said, as they were leaving. "Any time you open a bank account, Chips, they want your Social Security number. How do we get his?"

"Just write in using his name," Chips said. "Say that you lost yours, and ask for a duplicate. Nothing to it. They'll send one along in a couple of days. I keep half a dozen different ones at home myself, just in case. And if you have somebody right there to look over the mail before it's brought in to him, where's any problem?"

Russell gave Henry another quick glance.

"Then you'll get in touch with Fat Joey?" he asked.

"Owes me a favor," Chips said. "Let you hear, Russell. No trouble on this end. You just go back there and take care of yours the way I told you."

And as they drove back to North Pequanset, Russell had the same happy grin on his lips, and two or three times he laughed aloud. But Henry was quiet. Another four weeks now, no way out of it, and he would have to tell Abbie. His long fingers twined and twined, and it was small comfort when Russell again told him not to worry.

"Remember," he said, "that he can still change his mind. Maybe next time I'll catch him in a better mood, Henry. Let's hope."

But even when Henry's last month came, then his last week, things had not changed. Russell had always been a bit late getting into the office, and Henry was surprised when all of a sudden he became the first one in, and was personally checking over the mail when Henry arrived and before anyone else saw it. And he must have been keeping something secret from his wife, Prudence—another woman, Henry wondered uneasily—because several times he slipped

letters out of the pile, and put them covertly into his pocket.

Then Henry's last day came, and young Killeen did not even bother to come and say goodbye. He and Hazel were getting married on Saturday, and then, everyone in the office knew, they were taking a two-week honeymoon trip to Hawaii. They left right after the ceremony, and a bit later Russell phoned Henry.

"Caught him just right," he exulted. "I guess he has more of his father in him than we thought, Henry. He agreed to let your pension go through, starting November first. Only he says he doesn't want it to get around the office or everybody else will be looking for the same thing. So it's been arranged with an insurance company, nice and quiet, and you'll get your \$400 a month now as long as you live."

Henry felt a quick rush of tears to his eyes. It shamed him very much, and he could not even thank Russell.

"Is there anything wrong?" Abbie asked him, coming into the room as he was still standing by the phone and blowing his nose. "Who was that, Mr. Potter?"

"Russell," Henry said. "They want us to come over for dinner tonight, Mother. I think I'll bring along a bottle of wine."

"Well, our farewell to North Pequanset," Abbie conceded. "That's a very kind thought, Mr. Potter. First thing Monday morning now, you'll have to get in touch with the moving men. We don't have a worry in the world after that. It's just like a dream."

And a month later, down in Florida, Henry found that he did not have a worry in the world. His first pension check from the insurance company came through right on time, on a balmy and glorious Florida day, with Abbie as brisk and chipper again as a young girl, and lovingly waxing all the brand-new appliances they had. That night Henry took her to dinner in the best cafeteria around—the only one with both wall-to-wall carpeting and pine-scented air conditioning in all of south Florida—and afterward splurged on a very good quarter cigar.

Later they sat out on their screened porch, holding hands contentedly, and looking at all the brightly glowing Florida stars. It was only later on that Henry remembered the letter Russell had also sent on, and took it out of his coat pocket while Abbie was preparing the cocoa and cookies. It went:

"Dear Henry: All kinds of commotion up here. When our Walter got back from Hawaii with the blushing bride, it was discovered

that some more of his utility stocks had been sold off for \$58,000. The check was cashed at a bank down in Boston, but so far nobody has any idea as to who could have cashed it. Now we have all kinds of investigators on the job, but they're still running around in circles. They've been questioning everybody here down to old Mrs. Wiggins, the cleaning woman, but they haven't come up with a blessed thing, and I doubt if they ever will. So somebody did a job on our Walter all right, and it seems to have been done in this way.

"Walter P. Killeen might be a big name up in this neck of the woods, but of course down in Boston he's just another John Doe. Well, whoever did it, opened a bank account down there last month under the name of Walter P. Killeen, and even showed a Social Security card in that name, which is all the identification a bank usually requires of anyone. After that the fellow made about fifty transactions a week, in and out, in and out, and every time he deposited a check it was perfectly good. Finally he had the account built up to \$14,000, a pretty good amount of money, and then it appears he wrote in to the utility company—just a typed letter, with our Walter's usual scratch and scrawl at the bottom. You know how he always loves to sign his letters the way Churchill or FDR did.

"What he said in the letter—and he even got hold of some Bon Ton stationery to write it on, however he did it—was that he had inadvertently burned up the stock certificates and wanted them replaced. Well, they naturally replaced them, only they must have been intercepted in the mail, because our Walter is screaming he never wrote such a letter. And never got the certificates. But it seems that the duplicate certificates were mailed to his broker in New York, right away, with instructions to sell at the market price, and of course, with the way he's been buying and selling ever since old Mr. Killeen died, the brokers did sell. Then they sent the check to Walter P. Killeen at the Bon Ton—and the Boston Walter P. Killeen walked into his bank that day and cashed it.

"Maybe they called New York first to see if it was good, but as soon as they found out that it was they couldn't do anything but hand over the money. And a week later—remember our Walter was in Hawaii all that time—the Boston W.P.K. cleans out the rest of his account, telling them that he had a big deal going, and needed cash.

"But now, as I've told you, all hell's broken loose. Everybody's hiring lawyers, the bank, the stockbrokers, and our Walter—but I wouldn't be surprised if he finally gets stuck for the whole thing.

The brokers argue they aren't responsible, because they got his letter on Bon Ton stationery ordering them to sell, and because they made out the check properly, and sent it on properly to Walter P. Killeen at his business address here, where they always sent his mail. And the bank says they aren't responsible, because he should have taken better care of his Social Security card, and not let somebody else pass himself off as Walter P. Killeen by getting hold of it and using it as identification. Quite a mix-up, eh?

"And now a private detective agency has found out that Hazel's last good provider was a con man named Earl Harrington, and I guess they're trying to figure out whether our Walter was working a con game on the bank or the broker, or whether Earl and Hazel were working a con game on him. Hazel could have intercepted all the missing letters, of course, and I guess our Walter believes that she did. They have flaming fights every day now. Yesterday she hit him over the head with that big ashtray in his office, and he lost his voice screaming at her. Too bad you missed all the fun, old boy. It was really something!

"Saw our friend Chips McGinty last week—bought him and his sidekick Fat Joey a little present apiece for a certain favor they did—and they send along best wishes to you and Abbie. Enclosed is your pension policy, all legal and proper, which I had Chips arrange with one of the biggest insurance companies in Boston. So sit back and enjoy, enjoy, Henry. All blue skies for you and Abbie from now on. With much affection and respect to you both—Russ."

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THE LAST FULL MEASURE

by **HUGH PENTECOST**

7 Wall Street
New York, N.Y.

My Dear Katherine:

To say at the outset that this is a love letter may result in your not reading beyond this opening line. But this is an occasion for all the truth. I am beginning, only a week after the terrible climax that has left us both alone, with everything we had depended on for happiness lost to us, and without even memories we can bear to face. I want to put down all the facts about the disaster itself, and about myself, so that, whatever lies ahead, there can never be any unanswered questions in your mind. It will take me a long time to put it all down, so perhaps when it

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finally does reach you it may be possible for you to think of me as Richard Cantwell, a man, separated from associations with murder and treachery.

There are two places to begin. Perhaps it will be easier to start with facts instead of emotions. The facts began the night I returned to the National Hotel in Washington after a long session with my business and political associates. I remember the clerk at the desk handing me my key. He was a fat man who affected sideburns and whose frockcoat fitted him with a ludicrous snugness. I had to speak to him twice before he heard me.

"Oh, Mr. Cantwell," he said. "I didn't see you."

"Obviously," I said. "Are there any messages for me?"

"Did you hear it?" he asked.

"Hear what?"

The man moistened his lips. "It's late in the year for a thunderstorm, wouldn't you say? Yet it has to be a thunderstorm, doesn't it?"

Fatigue made me impatient. "I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "Are there any messages?"

"Oh, no. No messages." The clerk mopped his face with a handkerchief. "Have you heard any news, sir?"

That last question was asked to my back, for I had already started for the stairway which led to my second-floor suite. I was grateful for the enclosed stairwell, because my leg makes it difficult for me to climb. I have to move one step at a time, leaning heavily on my blackthorn stick. I suppose it hurts my vanity to be so awkward.

I should like to clear up the matter of my leg at once, Katherine. It does not need your sympathy, although I've seen it in your eyes. It has had a bearing on my life, but it is nothing to feel bad about. It causes me no pain. It is simply that I cannot bend it at the knee. This, naturally, causes me to walk with a considerable limp. I cannot run, or dance, or ride a horse, but I can walk as far as any man without tiring, even though it takes me longer.

I let myself into my rooms and struck a match, holding it above my head so that I could see my way to the center table to light the lamp there. It was a high-ceilinged, cavernous room and the light from the lamp barely reached to its corners. I lit the two-candle bracket on the mantel and carried it with me into the bedroom, where I put it down on the dresser. Then I took off my coat

and went over to the closet to hang it up.

The first thing I saw when I opened the closet door was the suit I had loaned Greg, hanging right in the center. I drew a deep breath. I hadn't realized how deeply rooted the tensions had been for the last five days. But now Greg was back!

I looked in the corner of the closet and saw that his uniform was gone. That was natural. He would, if he'd got the information he wanted, have set out to report to his headquarters at once. But he would certainly have left a message for me, probably on the writing desk.

I carried the candelabra back with me to the desk in the sitting room. There wasn't any message, but there was something that puzzled me. The inkstand had been overturned, and the ink had cascaded over the surface of the desk and down onto the rug. It was still wet on mahogany and tufted wool. I smiled to myself. It was typical of Greg when he was moved by excitement. He'd started to leave me a note, upset the inkstand in his hurry, and having nothing to write with had gone off without stopping to clean up the mess. He'd be back soon, I told myself.

I went over to the chair by the center table and sat down. It was proper that Greg should report to his headquarters first, but he knew how anxious I was for the results of his mission. He could have left me some hint. I reached for a cigar, and remembered that the only ones I had were still in the pocket of the coat I'd hung in the bedroom closet. I heaved myself up out of the chair and took the candelabra to light my way.

As I turned toward the bedroom the candlelight glinted against something lying on the floor near the desk. I went over and picked it up. It was the handle of an ornate letter opener that had been on the desk. It was a cheap copy of a Florentine dagger that some enterprising hotel manager had probably bought in gross lots. The blade was gone from the opener now, broken off at the hilt. I looked around for it but I couldn't see it anywhere.

You understand, Katherine, I had no reason at that moment to suspect anything was wrong. I told myself Greg had probably tried to force something with the blade of the opener: a dispatch box, the stubborn lock of a traveling case. The blade had snapped off. I remember looking casually in the wastebasket for it, but it wasn't there.

I went on into the bedroom to get my cigars, holding the candelabra in my left hand. As I reached the pocket of my coat the

candles shone directly on the suit Greg had borrowed. That was when I saw the stain. It was directly over the lefthand breast pocket, about the size of an irregularly shaped pancake.

"Ink," I thought. He'd spattered it on his suit as well. But then I noticed that there was a jagged tear in the very center of the stain. I took the suit into the other room to examine it more closely in the light from the lamp. The stain was not ink.

I hadn't anything very clearly in mind as I hurried back to the closet and put on my own coat again. I remember I looked once more in the corner of the closet where Greg's uniform had been. It was gone, all right. But now I saw that his sword was still there. Attached to the sword belt, it hung from a hook in the far corner. Greg had left his sword, and yet I knew he would never have gone out on the street without it. He would never have gone to report to headquarters without it.

In spite of my leg I can move quickly when it's required. I got into my coat, picked up my blackthorn, and headed back to the lobby.

If that stupid clerk had not been terrified of something else he would have seen that I was in a dangerous mood.

"Did you see my brother come in earlier this evening?" I asked him.

"Your brother? You mean Lieutenant Cantwell, sir?"

"I have no other brother," I said, trying to keep my voice under control.

"No, sir," the clerk said. He turned away from me. "It's *not* thunder! I'll swear it's not thunder."

I reached across the desk and grabbed him by the sleeve of his frockcoat. "He has been here," I said. "He came, and he went away again. How long have you been on duty?"

"Since six o'clock, sir. But I—"

It was nearly eleven now, and the ink was still wet. Greg must have come and gone while this man was here.

"You must have seen him," I said. "He had to ask for a key to get into the room. Didn't you give him a key?"

The man's pale jowls trembled nervously. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cantwell. I don't remember seeing him tonight. He—he might have got the key from the box there himself. I was away from the desk once or twice trying to get the news."

"Something has happened to my brother," I said. "Listen! Did you see him come in? Did he have any callers during the evening?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the clerk said. "I—I just can't remember. I can't concentrate on anything but the news."

"What news?" I shouted at him, my temper exploding.

"Lee's invaded Maryland," he said. "They say Stonewall Jackson's headed for Harper's Ferry. Do you know what'll happen if he takes the garrison there? They'll head for us here in Washington! They'll kill us all! They'll—"

I yanked the man forward with my left hand and slapped him hard with my right. "Stop gibbering!" I ordered him. "This isn't the Dark Ages. It's the year 1862. Now listen to me!"

In moments of extreme tension it is difficult to change the direction of one's thoughts. I, holding that terrified clerk by the front of his coat and slapping him back and forth across his quivering jowls, was infuriated because the man didn't understand the urgency of my questions. The poor fellow's imagination was flooded with pictures of a Confederate invasion of the capital, of a sacking of the city. He had no way of knowing what Greg meant to me. All he cared about was to get his family and transport them to safety. And quite rightly. Richard Cantwell, or the reasons for his presence in Washington, were meaningless to him.

But they had a complicated meaning, Katherine, starting long before the day I first met you, which, in a way, could be another beginning. The wretched clerk could never know or understand the deep affection I had for my brother Greg.

I was 17 years old when the first tragedy struck. I am 34 today, if that is of any interest to you—just ten years older than Greg. My father had built up a large importing business in New York, owned a small fleet of merchant ships, and was a powerful figure in the world of commerce. The summer of my seventeenth birthday he and my mother decided to go on a trip to England, and took me with them. Five days out of New York the tip of a Caribbean hurricane smashed the vessel like a walnut shell. My parents were both lost. I was felled by a broken spar that pinned me to the deck, smashing to powder the bones in my right knee. I was saved through the bravery of one of the sailors, who saw me just as he was about to abandon ship.

So I found myself, at the age of 17, partly crippled, with my father's business to run, a group of mature business associates who saw a chance to snatch a good thing from an inexperienced boy, and a seven-year-old brother to care for.

I don't have to describe Greg to you. Handsome to the point

where he could be called beautiful; vigorous, gay, courageous. Nothing was too good for him as he grew up. His primary schooling was the best. He went to Harvard Law School, with the idea that he would take over the firm's law business when he graduated.

There's something you must try to understand, Katherine, because it's important. All the things my crippling made it impossible for me to do, Greg did superlatively well. He rode like a centaur; he could box and fence, and was an expert gymnast. He was a marvelous dancer. He was instantly attractive to people. Understand at once, far from being jealous of these accomplishments, I took great pride in them. My own struggle had made me a little hard, a little cynical, I'm afraid. But through Greg I had all the things I'd missed—all but one, and that I didn't realize until a very short time ago!

As you know, the war broke out before Greg had finished his law studies. He could have avoided serving in the Army. My business was essential to the war effort, and Greg could have claimed to be an essential part of it. But Greg was a passionate believer in the cause of Union. He applied for a commission in the Union Army.

With our professional soldiers and West Point graduates split in their allegiance, there was a desperate need for officers of high caliber. Even though I am a Democrat, I have political influence. From Mr. Lincoln on down, the Republicans realize that this is no time for party preference. Northern Democrats must be kept happy or there will be no Union in the North. Greg got his commission in the First New York Cavalry, which was attached to the Army of the Potomac.

As you know, at that time the Army of the Potomac had just come under the command of General George B. McClellan. After a long series of failures under a chain of ineffectual commanders, the Army and the general public both saw McClellan as a man of destiny. Handsome, magnetic, only 35, McClellan was already being called the Young Napoleon. He had taken command after the disaster at Bull Run. A brilliant administrator and a fine trainer of troops, McClellan reorganized the forces of the North. That must be said to his everlasting credit. System and efficiency appeared in everything he controlled. He had a feverish energy that would have killed a dozen weaker men. It's no wonder he became Greg's idol. He was already the idol of millions of Americans.

I read Greg's enthusiastic letters about McClellan with interest. You see, the political picture was of great interest to me in my business, Katherine. The Republican administration was not as favorably disposed toward us as a Democratic one would be. Democrats were already looking ahead to the next election, and George B. McClellan was much in our thoughts. We knew he had voted for Stephen A. Douglas against Lincoln; that he was a Democrat. We knew that with a few substantial victories behind him, McClellan could very well be the next President of the United States.

Unfortunately, the victories hadn't occurred. McClellan, having trained and equipped his army, seemed reluctant to fight. Oh, he had excellent reasons. The Confederate Army facing him in Virginia outnumbered him by many thousands. He could defend his position against a larger force, but to attack would mean extending his supply lines and putting rivers between him and his source of supplies, thus swinging the odds heavily against him. He reasoned the superior Confederate forces would be able to cut him to pieces.

Finally, under pressure from Congress, and from his political advisers, McClellan conceived a plan to engage the Confederates at Manassas.

He massed his troops for the attack. Then, before he could launch his offensive, the Confederates withdrew across the Rapahannock to take up new defensive positions. McClellan could no longer engage the enemy, but he did march into their vacated position at Manassas—a bloodless victory.

But it was worse than no victory at all. Reporters and other observers could tell from the camp remains of the Confederate Army that the enemy forces had been a great deal smaller than McClellan had all along insisted. The whole country learned that McClellan had been held at bay by about 50,000 men, instead of over 100,000 as he had been claiming. There was an outcry. McClellan threatened to resign his command.

I tell you all this, Katherine, because, while you knew the purpose of Greg's mission, you may not have been aware of its political significance. It was what brought me to Washington. If McClellan was to be saved as a political figure, the hollow triumph at Manassas must be explained away.

So, Katherine, I came to Washington and I sent for Greg, thus unwittingly setting into motion our joint disaster.

I hadn't seen Greg for over a month when he came to my hotel suite that day. He looked wonderful: hard and lean and tanned from his army life. If he seemed more keyed up than I had ever seen him, I put it down to the excitement of war. We embraced warmly, and after we'd gossiped a bit about things at home, I got down to the problem that was on my mind.

"McClellan has lost face," I said. "Unless we can turn the tide the other way, his value to us, politically, is finished."

"McClellan is the greatest general in the world today," Greg said warmly. "Perhaps the greatest of all time."

"Be that as it may," I said, "he guessed wrong at Manassas. He could have taken the Confederates with one arm tied behind him."

It was unanswerable, and Greg had to admit it. "There's something wrong with his Intelligence," he said. He got up and began to pace around the room. "The man's taken every precaution, Rick. He has his Intelligence service, but to make doubly certain of his information, he's hired Allan Pinkerton, head of a big private detective agency, to report to him on the enemy strength and position. I'm doing staff work, you know. I've seen some of the Pinkerton reports. He signs them 'E. J. Allen,' for some reason."

"Well, Pinkerton or no Pinkerton," I said, "McClellan was led to believe the Confederates were twice as strong as they really were. Is Pinkerton working against him, or is he misinformed by his detectives? Is the Army Intelligence willfully giving wrong information, or are they incompetent?"

Greg shook his head. "I don't know the answer."

"We've got to find out," I said. "If McClellan is being deceived by his own people we've got to make it public. If he's just a cowardly fool—All right, Greg. All right!" He'd turned on me with a face like a thundercloud. "I'm just discussing possibilities."

"McClellan is the bravest man alive," Greg said.

"Then let's prove it," I said.

I had a scheme. Certain Southern businessmen had been making overtures to me, through British connections, to do business with them. They needed my ships and the goods they could supply. Naturally, I hadn't listened. I was committed to the cause of Union. But the Southerners were still trying.

"If I sent a representative to Richmond, he would be well received," I told Greg. "He would have an opportunity to watch and observe. A man with military training could make important de-

ductions from what he saw. Can you get a week's leave of absence?"

Greg's eyes blazed with excitement. "Of course! I could go tomorrow if you say the word."

"It can be dangerous," I warned. "I wouldn't suggest your going if there was anyone else I could trust. I can make preparations for you to start tomorrow. Come here, borrow a suit of mine, and travel as a civilian. There's a ship in Baltimore. The captain can get you ashore farther down the coast."

"You can count on me," Greg said. "I'll be ready in the morning."

I started to rise, but Greg put his hand on my arm. "There's something I've been eager to tell you, Rick." He flashed me his charming smile. "There's a girl—"

"You astound me," I said, laughing. There had always been a girl.

"This one is special," he said. "I've known her for nearly a year, ever since I first came here. I've asked her to marry me, and she's agreed. Her father has asked her to wait until after the war, but—"

"Her father?"

"He's Jared Willis, publisher of *The Dispatch*. You must have heard of him. Katherine's his only child. She's just wonderful, Rick. Wait till you see her."

"I'll be happy to meet the lady sometime," I said.

"Tonight!" he said. "They're having a few friends in. I sent word that if my business with you was finished early enough we might call on them. You're my only family, Rick. It's proper Katherine and her father should meet you."

I smiled at him. Actually, I was anxious to meet your father, Katherine. *The Dispatch* was an important newspaper, not yet committed in the coming elections. There had been persistent rumors that your father might be brought around to the Democratic side.

I patted Greg's shoulder. "Let's have a look at your fabulous lady," I said.

And so I came to your house, Katherine. Naturally, I was interested to meet you, as well as your father. If Greg was serious this time, it was important to me. I would never marry. The future of the Cantwell business empire would lie in Greg's hands, and in the hands of the woman he married.

We walked to your house, which was not far from the National. Greg talked about you most of the way. He told me of the tragedy that had involved you and your father some months ago. He told me how your mother, caught in Charleston at the outbreak of the war, where she was visiting friends, had come north by train as far as Richmond, and tried to make her way home from there by carriage. Greg told how, while traveling through a wooded section, she had been killed by a sniper's bullet.

I'm afraid I only half listened to this, and to his rhapsodic accounts of your beauty and charm. Now that Greg's adventure was arranged I began to have misgivings about it. He was a romantic, with none of my hard sense of reality; he could be expected to run unnecessary risks. I suppose, like most people, I took my own immortality for granted, but I could see Greg's frailties and the danger to him. I think if we had not reached your house when we did, and if I had not been troubled by another small thing, I might have changed my mind about sending him.

The small thing that had troubled me was the sensation that we were being followed. I walk slowly, and the ordinary pedestrian, traveling in the same direction, would have passed us. I had been conscious, ever since we left the hotel, of someone behind us, making no effort to overtake us.

As Greg pulled your doorbell I turned to look back the way we had come. A man had stopped a couple of doors away, and I saw the flicker of a match he held to a cigar. I caught only the blurred suggestion of high cheekbones and an aquiline nose. Then your butler opened the door and admitted us.

I haven't forgotten that first impression of your charming home: the delicate paneling, the fine faded rugs, the old brocades and satins, the spindly tables of polished wood, the crystal, and the bowls of hothouse roses on the mantel. But most of all I remember you coming toward us, your hands held out to Greg. I remember your warm pleasure at meeting me, the glance at my heavy stick, your guiding me to a comfortable chair. I remember feeling happier than I could remember. If you were the girl Greg had finally chosen, I was content.

The "gathering of friends" was indeed informal. There were only two besides ourselves—Morgan Kennedy and Paul Muncrief. It was the first time I'd seen either of them: Kennedy, loud, horsy, somehow out of place in that charming room; Muncrief, standing apart from us, tall, obviously a little drunk. Morgan Kennedy was

a stranger to me. Muncrief was, however, famous as a war correspondent for *The Dispatch*.

But I was most interested in your father, Katherine. The mark of tragedy was on his pale aristocratic face and in his sad blue eyes. His shock of white hair, and his carefully trimmed white beard and mustache, made me realize that you must have been a child of his late middle age. He was cordial, though remote, and you may recall that after a very few moments he suggested that I join him in his study for a cigar.

We went to the book-lined room, where your father poured me a glass of port from a decanter on a small sideboard and offered me a fine cigar. There was something inexpressibly weary about his movements, and I got the impression that it was a constant struggle for this man to draw himself away from the nightmare vision of a wooded road and his dead love sitting upright in a carriage with a bullet hole in her head. When he spoke to me, after sitting down behind his desk, it seemed to cost him great effort.

"Your brother has, of course, told you of the mutual affection that exists between himself and my daughter, Mr. Cantwell."

I smiled. "Even if he hadn't it would have been obvious, sir, when they looked at each other."

Your father nodded. "He seems to be a fine young man," he said. "I know a good deal about you and your background, Cantwell. I admire you for what you've done with your own life, and the manner in which you've brought up your brother."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I trust that admiration may allow us to come to an understanding on other matters I know are close to both our hearts."

He raised a pale blue-veined hand. "No politics, if you please, Mr. Cantwell. I have not made up my mind as to what course I shall follow, and until I do I prefer to discuss it with no one."

"I apologize if I took too much for granted," I said.

He smiled at me faintly. "We may yet discuss the matter, Mr. Cantwell, when I have decided where I stand on the future. But for now I would like to explain to you why I oppose an immediate marriage between Katherine and your brother."

"I understand, sir. Your recent tragedy—"

A nerve twitched in his cheek. "That is not entirely my reason. To be blunt, Mr. Cantwell, your brother may not survive the war. It is a risk any man faces who takes up arms. I do not wish Katherine to marry, have no part of a real marriage, and lose

what she has never had. If and when the war ends, and your brother has survived it—”

“I understand, sir,” I said, “and I don’t think it unreasonable.”

“I’m delighted to hear you say so,” he said. “It will relieve my mind if you’ll explain my attitude to your brother.” He rose from behind his desk. “And now shall we join the others?”

The atmosphere in the living room made me pause in the doorway. The hearty Mr. Kennedy was talking in a booming voice, apparently very well pleased with himself and the effect he was creating. I hadn’t liked the man on sight, and it was clear he was taking pleasure in goading Greg.

Greg stood by the mantel, looking tall and straight in his uniform—tall and straight, and very angry. You, Katherine, stood near him.

“Personally, I hope the Young Napoleon keeps on stalling,” Mr. Kennedy was saying. “The longer he delays, and the more he calls for reinforcements and new equipment, the better I’ll like it. It’s probably not polite to say it, Miss Katherine, but I’m a man who’s out first and foremost to take care of Number One.”

“An admirably patriotic attitude,” Greg said in a thin tight voice.

“Now, now, Lieutenant, no offense,” Kennedy said. “But McClellan is hollering for cavalry mounts, and I’m the man to supply them. Horses are my business. But it’ll take a little time to get the General what he wants, so I hope he keeps on sitting and hollering.”

Paul Muncrief laughed, and it had a sardonic sound. “I don’t think you need have any worries, Mr. Kennedy. We should all know McClellan by now—a great organizer, a great planner, but with no heart for fighting.”

“Mr. Muncrief!” Greg took a step toward the reporter, and your hand was instantly on his arm.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” Muncrief drawled.

“You have just called General McClellan a coward!” Greg said, his voice shaking.

“I have, sir,” Muncrief said. “It is nothing new. I have called him a coward in public and in print. I only hope that Mr. Lincoln realizes, before it’s too late, that McClellan will never fight.”

It was your father who stopped Greg’s second advance on Muncrief. His voice was clear and sharp. “Gentlemen! I will not have the war or its personalities disputed in my house. I must ask you

to change the subject of your conversation."

I heard you speak softly to Greg, evidently pleading with him. The tension broke, but, as you recall, it seemed difficult to pick up the threads of casual conversation. I knew that you and Greg would want to be alone, and I hoped that if I left it might serve to start the others.

Muncrief took the hint and said his goodbyes at the same time, so it happened that we left together and walked a distance down the street together. I confess that while I disliked his aggressive manner, and felt he had been unnecessarily rude in your drawing room, there was something about Muncrief that attracted me. I did not know then what was at the root of his bitterness.

We walked away in silence. Muncrief seemed lost in his own thoughts.

"Who is Morgan Kennedy?" I asked him. "He somehow seems out of place in the Willises' drawing room."

"Mr. Willis has influence in many places," Muncrief said. "You heard Kennedy. He's out for Number One. He wants help from Willis."

"But why is he accepted socially?"

Muncrief shrugged. "A war produces strange bedfellows, Mr. Cantwell. Perhaps Kennedy has something Willis wants."

"He seemed to take delight in getting under Greg's skin," I said.

Muncrief gave me a sidewise glance. "Your brother has a quick temper."

"He's served with McClellan ever since the General was placed in command," I said. "He feels more deeply about him than we would, as objective observers."

"Then you agree McClellan won't fight?" Muncrief asked.

"I have no opinion at the moment," I said, "but I think you know my politics, Mr. Muncrief."

"What is it you have against Mr. Lincoln?" Muncrief asked, a tinge of anger creeping into his tone.

"Why, only one thing," I said, laughing. "He's a Republican."

I had meant to turn the discussion off with a joke, but Muncrief wasn't amused. "Let me tell you, Mr. Cantwell, politics may yet lose this war. And another thing: If your brother takes offense at every word spoken against McClellan he's apt to find himself with plenty of trouble on his hands. McClellan can't be saved in the long run, either by hotheaded young hero worshipers or cynical

politicians." He stopped walking. "This is where I turn off, Mr. Cantwell. Good night."

I watched him go, with the distinct feeling that he had left me, not because we were going in different directions, but because he wanted to discontinue the conversation.

I walked slowly back to the hotel, thinking about Greg's mission. I knew its success was vital if McClellan was to be of future value to us. Just as I was starting up the steps of the hotel I noticed a man lolling against the front door jamb. He was tall and fair, with a bony clean-shaven face and an aquiline nose. He wore a pale-gray suit. He watched me with a kind of lazy interest as I came clumsily up the steps, and I recognized him as the man who had walked behind Greg and me on the way to your house. I stopped directly in front of him.

"Have we met somewhere?" I asked him.

He raised cool blue eyes to mine. "I think not, sir."

"It seems to me I saw you near the Willis mansion earlier this evening," I insisted.

"Willis?" he said. "I'm afraid I'm not acquainted with anyone named Willis. Nor do I understand the purpose of this conversation."

"I apologize if I've made a mistake," I said.

Greg came to my rooms the next morning in time to have breakfast. He was brimming with excitement over our plans. He'd had no difficulty in getting a six-day leave, and we both felt he could accomplish a great deal in that time. While he was changing into one of my suits he asked me what I thought of you.

"I couldn't be more pleased," I said. "I didn't have much chance to talk to Katherine, but I know she's a fine person and very right for you."

He laughed. "She was much taken with you, too," he said. "I hope I'm not acquiring another rival!"

"Rival?"

"Muncrief," he said. "Didn't you guess that was why he behaved the way he did? He had the inside track with Katherine before I met her. I think old Jared Willis still prefers him."

"He spoke well of you," I said, and repeated my conversation with your father.

We then went over the details of where he was to go in Richmond and to whom he was to present my letter. "Just remember one thing," I told him. "You're out to get information, not

to fight a war. You can be shot as a spy if you let your feelings get the better of you."

"I'll remember," he said. "I'll be back here before the sixth day is up."

"Goodbye," I said then. "And bless you."

Those were the pertinent facts leading up to that moment when I seized the terrified hotel clerk by his frockcoat and slapped him back and forth. He understood nothing of the reasons for my violence. He kept blubbering, "I'm listening, Mr. Cantwell!"

The anger drained out of me slowly, leaving me with a cold lump of anxiety in my chest. "Then listen carefully," I said. "Lieutenant Cantwell returned to this hotel and to my suite within the last hour or so. He must have got a key from the desk here."

"I didn't see him, sir," the clerk insisted doggedly. "There's been excitement. I've been away from the desk. He could have got the key for himself."

"And you didn't see him leave?"

"No, sir, I swear it!"

"And there were no messages, no callers? No one asked for him?"

"Mr. Cantwell, I keep telling you! I know nothing about your brother."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance, sir," a voice said behind me.

I turned quickly and found myself facing the tall clean-shaven man in the pale-gray suit. I hadn't seen him since our encounter five days ago after returning from your house.

"The clerk is telling the truth," this man said. "He's been away from his post here a good part of the last two hours. There was a caller, however, asking first for your brother and then for you. I took the liberty of assisting her."

"Her?" I thought instantly of you, Katherine.

"The lady—the caller," the man said.

"Just exactly who are you?" I asked him.

"The name is George Blades, sir. At your service," he said politely. "The lady couldn't raise the clerk, and I saw her distress and asked if I could help. She wanted to see your brother or you, so I took the liberty of knocking on the door of your rooms for her. I could get no answer, however, so we came away."

"The lady—she was small and delicate, with red-gold hair?"

"It so happens I recognized the lady," Blades said. "She was Miss Sybil Gaul, the actress."

I looked at him blankly. "I know no Miss Gaul!"

"She's acting a small bit in a piece that's being played at Ford's Theater," Blades said. "I recognized her from the play."

"This actress asked for my brother?"

"Or for you, if your brother was not available."

I could feel the pulse beating at my temples. "Our paths seem to cross, Mr. Blades. I don't understand your interest in me, and I haven't time to inquire into it at the moment."

Blades shrugged. "I just happened to be here when the lady asked for you, Mr. Cantwell. I did nothing I wouldn't have done for any other stranger."

Just then a man came running through the front doors of the hotel. He was hatless and in a state of great excitement.

"McClellan's marching against Lee!" he shouted. "They say the battle will be joined at Antietam Creek!"

I brushed past him and went out onto the street, moving as fast as my leg would let me. I had to get to you, Katherine, to find out if Greg had by any chance communicated with you.

Although it was nearly midnight, Washington was swarming with activity. Houses were lighted and there was considerable traffic. Carriages carrying whole families, along with their household belongings, were headed out of the city. People shouted bits of unrelated news to each other. McClellan had won a victory at South Mountain! The Confederates were in disorganized flight!

Carriages were stopped and the occupants told there was no reason to flee the city. At last there was a victory, a great one, for the Northern forces. The hesitant McClellan had, it seemed, finally struck with all his might.

I heard this only vaguely. The broken letter opener, the stained and torn suit in my closet, were in the forefront of my mind, bringing the conviction that disaster had overtaken Greg.

There was a puzzling contradiction, Katherine, which I don't think you fully perceived or wanted to perceive when we talked together. If Greg had got information of importance and had been tracked down by an enemy agent, that agent would certainly have tried to acquire the information, if it was in a physical form, or to kill Greg if he carried it in his head. But wouldn't such an agent have come prepared to do violence? Wouldn't he have been armed?

If Greg had been stabbed with that letter opener it meant only one of two things: either the person who had stabbed him had not come prepared to assault Greg, or he had found the weapon there and been clever enough to use it instead of his own.

There were many guests in your house when I arrived. I asked for you and gave the butler my name, and you came running—only to stop in the doorway when you saw it was not the Mr. Cantwell you were so eager to see.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," I remember saying.

You came to me and your fingers closed firmly on my arm. "Something's wrong," you said. "Something's happened to Greg."

"Have you heard from him?"

"No," you said. Your eyes were frightened. "But he still has another day."

"Another day?"

"His leave was for six days!"

"You knew about his leave?"

"Of course. He—"

"And what he was going to do with it?"

You started to answer, then lowered your eyes. I could read your thoughts. It was clear Greg had told you and sworn you to secrecy, but you had assumed that I had given him permission to tell you.

"He told you the other evening when we were here?" I asked.

You nodded. "While you were talking with Father in the study. Paul and Mr. Kennedy had gone to the pantry for a drink."

"Did you pass on your information to anyone?" I asked.

Your eyes flashed with anger. "Whom would I tell? Didn't his safety depend on its being kept a secret?" Your fingers tightened on my arm. "Has something happened to him?"

I seemed to know all about you in that moment, Katherine—your courage, your ability to stand the truth. I told you the facts as briefly as I could. You never wavered.

"Perhaps he was wounded before he returned," you said. "Perhaps it wasn't serious. There can be severe bleeding from a minor wound. He would have wanted to report at once to the General if he had important information."

"The letter opener," I said. "If he was stabbed with the letter opener, then it happened *after* he returned."

"You don't know that he was stabbed with it," you said. "You

may have been right when you thought he'd tried to open something with it."

"Then why would he carry off the broken blade?" I asked. "I'm afraid it's certain he went up to my rooms and found someone waiting for him, or else received a caller before he'd had a chance to change his clothes. There was some kind of struggle. The inkstand was overturned. The visitor must have seized the letter opener and stabbed Greg with it. The blade broke off."

"But he was able to change into his uniform after that and leave!" you protested.

"Was he? Why would he leave his sword? It was, in a way, part of his uniform. He'd never have gone off without it."

"If he was more severely hurt than we hope—"

"Then why change at all? Why not go straight to a doctor?"

The color had drained from your face, but your head was still held high and your eyes were direct and tearless. "What do you think happened?" you asked.

"I think that Greg's assailant helped him to change," I said. "Helped him to leave. A wounded civilian would attract attention on the streets. A wounded soldier, with the fighting relatively close at hand, would not be so noticeable."

"You think he was taken somewhere by the person who attacked him?"

"It's a strong possibility."

"To get medical help," you said.

"Or to hide a corpse," I said grimly. We had to face it. I looked past you toward the drawing room. "Is your friend Mr. Muncrief among the visitors in there?"

"Paul? No. He's on assignment with the army." Then you realized what I was driving at. "You don't think that Paul—"

"I understand that he had hopes at one time of winning you."

"No!" you said sharply. "Paul doesn't like Greg. Perhaps he is jealous. But to— Besides, he's been with McClellan's army since day before yesterday."

But with a press pass, I thought, that would let him come and go through the lines at will and without question. "Morgan Kennedy? Is he among your guests?"

"Yes, but—"

"He seems to have ready access to your home."

"But he doesn't even know Greg."

"My dear Katherine, Greg told you his secret, and both Muncrief

and Kennedy were here in the house. Either one of them might have overheard. Muncrief had personal reasons for hating Greg. Kennedy is from the West; he can easily have dealt with both sides in this war. For all we know, his real commitments may be to the South."

"But Greg and I were quite alone when he told me."

"Were you? Can you be certain you weren't overheard, if someone *wanted* to overhear?" I saw the glimmer of doubt in your eyes. "Has Greg ever mentioned a Miss Sybil Gaul to you?"

"Gaul? I never heard the name," you said. "Who is she?"

"An actress, playing at Ford's Theater. She asked for Greg at the hotel earlier this evening. I thought you might know the nature of their acquaintance."

For the first time, Katherine, you showed signs of cracking. Your lips trembled slightly. "I—I've never heard of Miss Gaul," you said.

"Do you know a man named Blades?" I asked. "George Blades. Tall, fair, clean-shaven."

You shook your head. I reached out and took your hand in mine. "I'm sorry to have brought you such news," I said. "Perhaps it's not as bad as I fear. One thing is certain though, Katherine. If Greg is in a position to communicate with anyone at all it will be you or me. If you hear anything from him, get a message to me at once at the National Hotel."

"Perhaps," you said in a small voice, "this Miss Gaul—"

"Don't think it for a moment, Katherine," I said. "I know a man in love when I see him. I know Greg!"

It was then that you suddenly threw your arms around my neck and I felt your cold cheek pressed against mine. "Dear Richard," you whispered. "Find him! Please find him!"

Looking back on it, Katherine, I blame myself for a kind of ineffectuality in those first hours. I was not a detective. I was deeply involved emotionally. Greg was the person I loved most in the world. You may ask why I didn't go to the police at once. There were two reasons: the police would ask questions about Greg, the reason for his having been in civilian clothes, that I wasn't yet prepared to answer. But also there was the doubt that the police would do anything at all.

The city was strangely, almost hysterically, alive as I left you and headed toward Ford's Theater. Impromptu torchlight parades

had sprung up. The word was everywhere that in one fell swoop McClellan had crushed the Confederacy. Lee's army had been annihilated. To all intents and purposes the war was over.

People jostled me as I walked along the plank sidewalk toward Ford's Theater. One man, very much the worse for drink, grabbed me by the shoulders and tried to force me to do a hornpipe with him in the middle of the street. The police would more than have their hands full with this celebrating mob.

Ford's Theater was dark, as I knew it would be, but a night watchman was able to direct me to where the acting company lived, a boardinghouse only a couple of blocks away. Nobody paid any attention to my knock on the boardinghouse door. The place was lighted, and from inside I could hear voices singing and laughing. McClellan's victory was being celebrated here, too. I tried the door, and found it unlocked.

I let myself into an entrance hall. To the left was an unoccupied formal parlor. To the right was a drawing room filled with people. Food and bottles of wine stood on a table in the center of the room. The company was singing to music played on a concertina by a foppish-looking young man.

Before I could move toward this room another man, tall, extremely handsome, in frockcoat and flowered satin waistcoat, came toward me, scowling. His speech and manner marked him as one of the actors.

"You're looking for someone, sir?" he asked.

"Miss Sybil Gaul," I said.

His frown deepened. "You're a friend of Miss Gaul's?"

"If you'll tell Miss Gaul that Mr. Cantwell is here I'll discuss my business with her," I said. "And if you don't mind, I'm rather pressed for time."

"Are you indeed?" the young man said dryly. "Well, if you'll forgive my saying so, Mr. Cantwell, this is a private party."

"Will you call Miss Gaul, or shall I get her for myself?" I asked.

He was an inch or two taller than I, and his blue eyes suddenly gleamed with pleasure. If he had noticed my stick he had assumed it was an affectation and not a necessity. "It might be interesting to see what would happen if you tried," he said.

My footwork may not be as fast as the normal, but nature has a way of compensating. I'm rather stronger than average in the shoulders, arms, and hands. "I'm not looking for trouble," I said, "but if you force it on me—"

"Patrick!"

I hadn't noticed the woman come through the arched doorway from the living room. As she came quickly up behind the actor I realized she was startlingly beautiful, in a theatrical way. She had dark hair and eyes and a voluptuous figure which, at the same time, suggested nothing of cheapness. She gave me a friendly smile.

"This is no night for quarreling," she said.

"It's not of my choosing," I said. "I came here to call on Miss Sybil Gaul. This gentleman—"

"This gentleman," she said, still smiling, "is Patrick Joyce, my fiancé. I am Sybil Gaul."

I bowed. "I am Richard Cantwell," I told her.

"Cantwell?" she said vaguely. Her hand went out to Joyce's arm and rested there. "Should the name mean something to me?"

"You called at the National Hotel a couple of hours ago," I said, "asking for my brother or me."

Joyce shook off the girl's restraining hand. "This fellow is looking for trouble, Sybil. I should be delighted to give it to him."

"Please, Patrick! He seems to be quite serious. But there is some mistake, Mr. Cantwell. I never heard of you or your brother, and I certainly haven't been to the National Hotel this evening—or any other evening, for that matter."

I stood very still, my hand tightening on my stick. I could have sworn she was lying.

"Why should I have called on you?" she asked.

"That's what I came here to find out, Miss Gaul."

"Look here, Cantwell," Joyce said. "Two hours ago Miss Gaul was playing on the stage at Ford's Theater. She was at the theater from about seven o'clock this evening until just before midnight. She was certainly not at the National Hotel two hours ago or at any other time this evening. I escorted her to the theater. I escorted her here after the performance. Does that satisfy you?"

I looked straight at the girl, ignoring Joyce. "My brother, Greg Cantwell, is a lieutenant in the First New York Cavalry," I said. "He has met with some kind of violence tonight. I am trying to find him, or find out what has happened to him. If there is any way you can help me—"

"Miss Gaul doesn't know your brother. How can she help you?" Joyce said. His anger was rising again.

"Do you know a man named George Blades?" I asked the girl.

She shook her head. "I've never heard the name."

"He is tall, fair, and clean-shaven," I said. "He told me that you came to the hotel asking for Greg. He says he attempted to find Greg or me for you—knocked on the door of my rooms. He certainly knew you by sight, Miss Gaul."

The girl's face was deathly pale. "He was mistaken," she said. "I'm sorry I can't help you, Mr. Cantwell."

"My brother may have been murdered," I said. "I hope it will not be on your conscience, Miss Gaul."

Joyce stepped between me and the girl. "I'll give you just three seconds to be on your way, Mr. Cantwell."

There was no way I could force her to talk, certainly not at that time. I turned and walked out of the house. The street was dark, except for the distant flickering of torches and bonfires. I walked slowly, trying to decide what my next move should be.

Blades or the girl had lied. Why would Blades send me on a wild-geese chase? The girl's story would be easy enough to check. If she was on the stage she certainly wasn't at the National.

The attack came from nowhere, silent as an animal approaching on padded feet. I had no chance to protect myself. The first blow missed my head, but landed with such force on my shoulder that I fell forward onto my hands.

I had only time to realize that there was more than one assailant, when a cannon shell seemed to explode inside my head, and darkness enveloped me.

I became aware of excruciating pain that seemed to cleave my skull from front to back. Then I heard excited voices around me. I opened my eyes, to stare up into half a dozen faces, made weird by the light from two torches.

"He's coming round," someone said.

I realized I was propped up in the darkened doorway of a house. A man with the heavy odor of whiskey peered closely at me.

"You all right?" he asked.

I wanted to laugh, but something warned me it would be extremely painful.

"You've got a lump on the back of your head the size of a cantaloupe," the man said. "You'd better get to a doctor."

"What happened?" I asked. My voice sounded thick and distant.

"This town has gone crazy tonight," the man said. "It's worse than an invasion—looting, highway robbery! A couple of thugs

tried to rob you, sir. Fortunately, our party came along and they took to their heels. You still seem to have your watch and your wallet. I don't think they had time to finish the job."

"If you'll help me up."

The man got me to my feet, where I stood, swaying dizzily. Another member of the party handed me my stick and hat. "I don't know how to thank you," I said.

"Lucky we happened along, sir. This isn't a good night to be traveling alone. Can we convoy you any place?"

I looked down at my heavy stick. "I won't be caught napping again," I said.

I made my way slowly toward the National Hotel, my head an agony of pain. Even then I was convinced the attack on me had not been a coincidence, a part of the night's disorderly celebrations. Blades had sent me to see Sybil Gaul; Blades, who had tracked Greg and me to the Willises' home five nights ago; Blades, who had been present when I learned of Greg's disaster. Miss Gaul had been lying when she said she'd never heard of me.

It was a perfect setup for a trap, I thought. Blades sends me on a wild-geese chase to see his ally, Miss Gaul, giving him ample time to set up an ambush for me. But why? What did they expect to gain by an attack on me?

Two answers occurred to me: if they thought Greg had seen me and passed on any information he'd gathered on his mission, I must be silenced. If I was unwittingly in possession of some clue to the identity of Greg's assailant, I must be silenced.

I felt like a fly caught in a spider web. Kennedy, a roving trader, could easily, and by the very nature of his business, be working for the Confederates. Miss Gaul, an actress who, by the nature of *her* profession, must have traveled the length and breadth of the country, could easily be a member of an enemy underground system. Blades—unexplained, unaccounted for, ever-present—certainly fitted the picture. Even Muncrief, outwardly a strong Union supporter, could fit that picture. Who could be more useful to the enemy than a newspaper correspondent who could travel freely and without question?

I was surrounded by Greg's enemies, and therefore mine, without a shred of concrete evidence against any of them. I must find such evidence before a second attack on me was successful.

There was a new clerk on duty at the National, and he answered my questions civilly. He did not know any George Blades.

He did not recognize him from my description. Blades was not registered at the hotel and had not been for several weeks back.

I went up to my rooms. Nothing seemed to have been changed or touched since I'd left them. It was then, Katherine, that I did something which, of course, I should have done at the very beginning. I went to the closet and took out the suit I'd lent Greg to examine it more closely.

Any last hope I'd had for Greg's safety was dissipated, for in the suit I found his wallet, a small notebook, and his watch chain, but no watch. The wallet contained his identification, his leave papers, but no money. The notebook, a cheap penny affair, was missing half its pages. There was one page left with writing on it:

Kenneth Whalen—Bates Street

My watch—five dollars

I sat staring at these objects. They proved that Greg hadn't changed to his uniform with the intention of reporting back to his regiment; he would have needed his wallet and the papers it contained. The fear I'd expressed to you that he'd been taken somewhere, dressed in his uniform to attract less attention, became a certainty.

The notebook, I thought, might have contained the information he'd gone to get. His assailant had torn out the important pages. But this thing of the watch—and of Kenneth Whalen—made no sense.

Dawn was turning the sky gray in the east as I reached Bates Street, a dead-end alleyway with only three houses and a shop on it. The sleepy shopkeeper said he knew Kenneth Whalen well. He was employed in the Government, a clerk in the Department of Agriculture, he thought. Whalen wasn't to be found where he lived. His landlady reported he was either out celebrating or, like other government employees, been called on to work that night.

I left a note for Whalen with his landlady, asking him to get in touch with me at the hotel, or, failing that, if he had any news about Greg to get in touch with you.

The pain in my head seemed to have taken on a steady drum-like beat. I had no doubts any longer. Perhaps it would be better to say I had no hope. Someone had murdered Greg there in my rooms, and had taken away his body, dressed in the uniform. A fierce, consuming rage was burning inside me. I would find that killer. I must find him!

(continued on page 93)

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 537th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Silver-haired Mattie Garth had broken her leg and was helpless when the danger came. . .

The author, Audree Distad, is married and has a fifteen-year-old son. She has "worked on a daily newspaper and a woman's magazine, and in areas of advertising and public relations." Mrs. Distad has had three children's books published, but "Last Request" is her first adult fiction. Currently she is free-lancing, with a "part-time library job to support my writing habit" . . .

LAST REQUEST

by AUDREE DISTAD

Mattie Garth smoothed the patchwork quilt which lay across her thin frame. My, it's worn well, she thought with satisfaction. How long since I made it? Forty years ago? Right here in this room, too, this big sunny room. That square there, that came from my Sunday church dress. And there's part of Ella's baby blanket. And here's a piece from Frank's red plaid jacket. Frank always liked this quilt. "Mattie, you're a regular artist with the needle," he'd say. Oh, Frank, why'd you have to go on first and leave me alone?

She patted the quilt again, thinking that's why they call them comforters. No time to be sad now. Got to fight this broken leg. Danged steps! If that Ed had fixed them when he said he would. Calls himself a handyman. Danged men! They're full of good intentions, but along comes something they want to do more than fix and patch, like hunting season. And hunters? Don't see them all day, till they come home late, cold air spilling off their jackets into the kitchen. Tired and wanting supper.

Yesterday must have been the opening day of the season, judging by the gunfire in the woods. A sight healthier indoors, Mattie thought. Why, last year Mrs. Barnes heard a stray bullet wing right past her straw hat while she was feeding the chickens. It's got so it's not safe to be out, not any more.

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Mattie shifted her position as best she could with the cast. "Hope Ella brings those crutches today," she muttered. "I am surely crabbed sitting here day after day." Beats going to Ella's though, she thought, all those whooping kids. She didn't like it, me laid up here with Mrs. Ed staying on, but Ella never lets anybody run things but herself. Mrs. Ed and I manage just fine. Soon's I get those crutches I can do for myself again.

Then Mattie sighed, because in fact the cast pinned her to the bed like a mounted butterfly. She reached for the binoculars on her bedside table and turned toward the window. May as well work on my bird list as lie here feeling sorry for myself, she thought. Soon as I get the sparrows sorted out I'll be real expert. Hope Mrs. Ed remembers to buy birdseed.

At that she peered down the road to see if Mrs. Ed's car was in sight. All she saw was a green pickup truck come bouncing along the gravel road. It stopped beside a narrow cornfield bordering the woods. Mattie raised the glasses for a closer look.

One man jumped down from the cab and the driver passed a gun out to him. The hunter's orange cap bobbed like a strange bird toward the trees. The pickup lurched forward, then stopped again, closer to Mattie's driveway. The driver lifted another gun from the rack behind his head and he got out. He paused to button his plaid coat. Mattie watched, admiring the shiny, tooled sideplate of his rifle. Custom-made, she thought, the kind we never could afford. Why's he stalking cross angle with the other hunter? Wonder if they think they're driving the game? Must be city folks. A movement caught her eye. Say, now, is that a white-throated sparrow?

She was focusing on a small bird when she heard the shot. A single report, followed by silence. Reckon he missed, she thought, except to scare off my sparrow. With a sigh she lowered the glasses. At the same time the driver reappeared from the woods. He glanced behind him, drew a cigarette from his pocket, and cupped his hands as he lit it.

Danged fool smoking in a dry field, Mattie thought. Whole country's apt to go up in smoke because of you, bozo. She glared through the glasses again, seeing clearly the sharp red beak of his cap, the long thrust of his jaw, the careless loop of his arm holding the gun. That's funny, she thought, it ain't the same gun. Why'd he go in with one gun and come out with another? Not likely he'd lose a fancy custom job.

The sun was high, glinting on the yellow autumn leaves. It

streamed into the bedroom, falling softly on Mattie's silver hair and on the quilt. She didn't know why she suddenly felt cold. What's keeping Mrs. Ed, she wondered. Been gone an hour. Not as if I could skip out of here should the place catch fire.

Of course with my bird glasses, she thought, I do feel closer to the outside. Almost like I could touch that hunter. I only wish they didn't bring the sun into my eyes, too.

The hunter turned as if she'd spoken to him. His dark eyes seemed to see the house for the first time, seemed to burrow into the glasses. Mattie quickly lowered them, returning a safe distance between herself and the field. Felt like he could see me, she thought, but that's silly. All he can see is the house. And why would he care. I wonder where Mrs. Ed can be keeping herself.

Even without the binoculars Mattie could see the hunter moving to his pickup. It advanced slowly, turned up the drive, and stopped near Mattie's porch. She pulled the quilt toward her throat.

The hunter glanced toward Mattie's window as he headed toward the house. She heard his boots scrape on the porch steps and cross to the front door. The knock was slow and careful.

Maybe I'll stay quiet, she thought. Maybe he's just curious and will go away. Then she slapped the quilt. I act like I've done wrong, she fussed. What ails me? "Hello out there," she called. "You can come on in by yourself."

The door squeaked and a heavy tread sounded on the pine floor of the front hall. "I can't come out," said Mattie. "I'm laid up in here." She wished her voice didn't sound so brittle.

The hunter seemed to fill the door. He was taller and wider than he had appeared from a distance, and his face had a sullen set. "Thought I saw a flash of light up here," he said in a gruff voice. His glance flicked toward the field glasses at Mattie's side.

Why didn't I slide them under the bed covers, she thought. "I see you been hunting," she said. "Find anything?"

"Been an accident," he said, watching her face. "Fellow I was with stumbled. Blew his head nearly off."

Mattie couldn't stop the shiver that passed over her. "Why, that's a terrible thing," she said. "You'll be wanting a telephone?" She faltered as the hunter stepped closer to the bed.

He was close enough to share Mattie's view of the empty road. "Get many people up this way?"

"Sometimes," Mattie said warily.

"You laid up here alone?"

"Oh, no. Least not for long. There's a woman stays with me while I got my leg trouble. She'll be coming any minute now, back from the store. I expect her any time."

The hunter sniffed. "You do, huh? You looking out for her with them binoculars?"

"Ah," Mattie hesitated, "They're mostly for looking outside here at the bird feeder. I been watching the birds." Her hand fidgeted over the quilt. "There's a phone in the kitchen you can use to call the sheriff. Sheriff Olsen. Just tell him you're at Mattie's. He'll know where. Stops in regular to see me. You know, hello and how are you. Sheriff Olsen."

"You sound anxious to see him."

"Oh, I like company. Folks know I'm laid up. They've all been dropping by. There's hardly an hour passes someone don't stop in. Wouldn't surprise me at all if someone was to come by." She looked wistfully toward the road. Empty. "Like I say, use my phone. It's quicker than driving to town."

The hunter backed a wooden chair near the bed and straddled it, crossing his arms along the back rest and lowering his chin on top of them. He studied her in an undecided way. "No hurry now. You and me can kill some time," he said flatly. "Since you're stuck there in your bed."

Mattie swallowed hard. He was so close she could have put her hand on his sleeve. "Isn't there anybody you ought to call? Your friend got family?"

The hunter's short laugh was more of a bark. "First off, he's not a friend. We're partners in a lumberyard, or was. And yeah, he's got a wife, but she won't waste any tears when she hears. Be a sight more pleased about it than my wife will be."

"Oh?" said Mattie, and then, "Oh." She took a breath and added, "Still, shouldn't you be notifying someone? Maybe he's lying hurt out there. Every minute could count."

"He ain't hurt. He's way past hurtin'." The hunter rubbed one hand across the back of his neck, like someone easing a headache. "How'd you come to break your leg?"

"I took a fall," said Mattie. "My old bones are dry, I guess. One of them just snapped."

"Better breakin' your leg than your neck."

"That's a fact," Mattie agreed. The palms of her hands felt moist and cold and she pressed them against the bed. And another fact, she told herself, is this bird's a genuine cuckoo. I got to keep my

wits now, try to ease him on out of here. "You know anything about birds? I've been trying to identify a couple of sparrows and I swear they won't sit still long enough for me to get a good look."

He grunted. "Want me to go out and shoot 'em so you can have a close look?"

"Mercy, no! Such harmless little things. Your gun would blow them to bits."

"Rather I'd wring their necks quick?"

Mattie's voice quavered, "I can see you're no bird lover."

"That's not true," he said. "I like birds stuffed and roasted, and I like their feathers in a pillow." He looked at the pillow under Mattie's head. "And I like 'em smothered," he said slowly, "in gravy."

"No!" said Mattie. "Why, if that isn't a pure coincidence I don't know. The church is having a harvest dinner tonight—whole platters of game birds and venison and a table of scrumptious pies. You go out to my phone and call Mrs. Olsen and tell her Mattie wondered wasn't tonight the harvest dinner at the church."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Everybody in your town named Olsen? Isn't that the sheriff's name? You want me to call his wife?"

Mattie could taste the perspiration on her upper lip. "She's in charge of the dinner—and I thought—"

"Thought, did you? Leave off so much thinking. Never saw anyone so involved with a sheriff and his family."

"I always love the harvest dinner," Mattie insisted, trying to fill the room with her own voice, trying to surround them with her own presence. "Such good food. The ladies are fine cooks. Always been a huntin' community. My dad always brought in pheasants, sometimes a grouse, usually one deer, if not two. And he never had but an old .30-06. No telling what he'd've shot with a fancy custom gun like yours."

The hunter straightened as if he'd been hit in the head. "Fancy gun like mine? What're you saying? You know my gun?"

Mattie clenched her fists helplessly at her sides. "I was just guessing. I don't know your gun. I got no way to know your gun."

"You been thinking again, seems to me." He backed slowly off the chair. "That's it, you watched me with them binoculars! Okay, old lady, you like my gun so much, I'll let you see it close up."

Mattie closed her eyes and waited. She heard the pickup door yanked open, the gun scraped across the window rack, a clip slid home. "My God, Mattie," she murmured, "you sure opened your yap this time."

His steps thudded in the hallway. "This here's it," he said coming into her room. "This the fancy gun you was so interested in?"

"No sense you getting so exercised," said Mattie, trying not to stare at the gun. "I just figured you had a fine gun."

"You figured," he said with a sneer. "You worked it all out, everything that happened, didn't you?"

Mattie took a long breath. "You might get away with it once, mister, might make folks believe it was a hunting accident. But twice? Even our small-town sheriff would get suspicious of two people shot in one day. Might as well write him a letter: You ain't too smart."

"Oh, no?" He glowered, but his grip on the gun loosened. "No? How 'bout a pillow full of bird feathers. How'd you like to choke to death on bird feathers? Old hen like you, it would be fitting. Everybody'd think it was your time come, think you flew the coop natural. How'd you like that notion?"

"Not so much," Mattie admitted. She was getting angry. Enough was enough. "If you got it in your pea brain to do this thing," she said, "you ought to do it with some style. You've got no sense of ceremony. Bet you didn't have none out in the woods either. Just hauled back and blew his head off with no style at all, except to leave the gun that did the shootin'."

"What're you talking about?"

"Pah," said Mattie, "if you're bound to do a thing, you got to do it right. You've heard of the 'condemned man ate heartily'?"

"Yeah. My old partner ate his fill of pancakes this morning. What about it?"

"I've got some jugs of apple cider mellowing down in the cellar. Since I went to the effort of putting it by, it would be a shame not to get to taste it once."

"You think I'm going to haul up cider so you can get crocked before you go? You're crazy."

"Now you listen to me. There's such a thing as women's rights and last requests and I want apple cider from my cellar. Now git!"

He chuckled. "Suppose you can have a nip at that, you old hen. Might even take one along with you. Where is it at?" He leaned the gun against the chair. Might as well have been in the pickup.

"I thank you kindly," she said. "It's in the cellar. Go to the kitchen, and there's an old cookstove—I never could bring myself to get rid of that cookstove. Made some mighty good biscuits for Frank there in my time."

"Never mind biscuits if you want that cider."

"I'm telling you. Beside the stove is a ring set in a little hollow in the floor. It's the handle on the trap door. Lift it up and lean it back against the wall so it don't drop down and bean you. Besides, you leave it wide-open for light. Go down the ladder. When you get to the cellar floor, reach out to your left. There's six jugs sitting there. Just bring the nearest one. I got glasses here from taking my pills and all. You like cheese, too?"

"This ain't no party," he growled. "It's your last request." He lumbered out the door. Mattie heard him move into the kitchen, toward the stove. She imagined him looking about first—such a first-rate kitchen would surely catch his eye. Now, she thought, he's spotted the ring.

She heard the creak of hinges as he drew the trap door open and let it crash carelessly against the wall. There was silence. She imagined she could smell the dankness of the cellar. He'll be backing onto the top rung, she figured. Hurry now, don't study on that ladder. It don't appear rotten till you hit the third step.

"Damn!" A cry, not loud except to someone lying in bed listening for it.

Mattie smiled—that ought to do the trick. A six-foot drop should take the sass out of him. Didn't it break my leg? And then she wondered, what if he fell free with nothing hurt?

"Damned old woman," came a bellow from the cellar. "Near broke my neck." The voice grew louder, panting as if he were hoisting himself up hand over hand, hauling his frame over the edge of the trap door onto the kitchen floor. Sounded to Mattie like he was getting onto his feet, limping toward the hall and her room.

He'll have smoke coming out of his ears, Mattie thought as she struggled. Feels like I'm swimming in concrete. She groaned.

When he lurched into the door frame, Mattie had tears of pain spilling down her cheeks and she was sitting up, weakly propped on her left arm. In her right arm she supported the gun. She only needed one finger to pull the trigger.

Lord, that's a mess, she thought later, can't make a clean shot with an old piece like this. Still, it's lucky for me that Frank was the birdwatcher and I brought home the game.

"Q"

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 538th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "I'm now going to give you a little advice" . . .

The author, William F. Laus, lives in a suburb of Detroit. He is in his "late twenties, rapidly balding, single, and owned by a large brown mutt named Baron." A "sports nut," Mr. Laus lives for the arrival of each summer, when he can begin to play softball. He is on three teams, one of which he manages. "One of my hobbies," he wrote, "is big game hunting—that is, sitting in front of the TV set on weekends hunting for the big game." His occupation is repairing cars. "I enjoy the work. It offers the challenge of a good mystery, and the satisfaction of finding the solution" . . .

WELCOME TO WESTFIELD

by WILLIAM F. LAUS

Dear Mr. Businessman,

Welcome to the community of Westfield. I hope you've enjoyed your stay in this town so far. I too have to travel in my business, and I've spent many nights in hotels and motels. This hotel you're staying at is one of the best in this part of the state. I particularly recommend the coffee shop downstairs for breakfast in the morning. As I said before, my business is almost always conducted in hotels such as this. Unfortunately for you, you were out when I called at your room. You see, I'm a thief and I've burglarized this room during your absence.

You've looked around the room by now and you can't see any signs of a burglary. There are no overturned drawers, no ripped-open suitcases. There are no physical signs that the room has been robbed. I find that by keeping things neat and orderly you miss very little of what is in a room. Besides, if the maid forgot a towel or something and came in and found everything out of place, she would call the police. And if the police came here while I'm working in another room, it might prove embarrassing.

© 1979 by William F. Laus.

I did, however, break into this room and I offer the typewriter as proof. It used to be under the bed and it used to be yours. You really shouldn't jam a typewriter like this under a hotel bed. For one thing, it badly scratches up the cover, and for another, it isn't a good hiding place at all.

You may have noticed that your C.B. radio is still sitting on top of the dresser. I was going to take it, but I saw your driver's license number engraved on the back of it. I did take the camera that you had hanging in the closet. I see that the camera is brand-new, so you hated to mark anything on its shiny surface. However, if you had marked it, I would have left it.

I found about \$600 in cash in your suitcases. That was pretty easy to find. I almost missed the \$200 in your sport coat pocket. If I hadn't tried the coat on for size, I wouldn't have gotten the money. The coat didn't fit, but your shoes did. I also have the \$50 that was in the toe of the brown loafers. I left the loafers because I don't need another pair of loafers.

I'm now going to give you a little advice: Don't keep that much cash in your room. I know a lot of people in my line of work who would hide in your room until you've returned, knock you over the head, and then grab your wallet. The thought of a lot of money walking into a dark room makes most of my colleagues greedy. I would be a bit more careful next time if I were you.

You're probably wondering why someone who has broken into your room would bother to stop and write you a letter. I have two reasons for doing this. The first is that I wanted to try out the typewriter to see if it's worth stealing before I lugged it down the stairs. The second reason is that I found the spare set of keys that you hid in the typewriter. While you were reading this note, I just swiped your car.

Sincerely yours,
A Thief

"Q"

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 539th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . We've heard of skeletons in closets, but one in a dressing-table drawer? . . .

The author, Diana Schrader, is in her late thirties. She is a legal secretary, musician, and "an art museum groupie." She and her husband, also a musician, live in a tiny house in San Francisco that is "full of books, dogs and cats, and musical instruments." Her hobbies include writing, reading, playing the piano, going to museums, and gardening . . .

THE CARTIÈRE CROSS

by **DIANA SCHRADER**

A brightly colored envelope that calls itself a "Mailgram" is hard to take seriously. For a minute or two it looks like an advertising circular, perhaps an invitation to buy magazines. When I saw one in my mailbox with the usual clutter of cents'-off coupons and sweepstakes entry blanks, I didn't realize at first what it was.

It was a message telling me that Alexandra had died of a heart attack.

I sat there numbly with the opened mailgram on my lap until the last of the afternoon sun faded and the room grew dark. Alexandra *couldn't* be dead. I was shocked, of course, and felt guilty (how long had it been since I'd seen her?), but I was also genuinely surprised. Alexandra had succeeded in holding back time so well that I really believed she would cheat death too.

Alexandra was my grandmother, my mother's mother. When my parents were killed in an automobile accident, she took me in and raised me as her own daughter—that is, until I grew too tall and lanky to be a sweet little daughter. Then she tried to pretend we were contemporaries.

"Isn't it grand," she would say, "that we're such good *friends*," and she would go on again about how much better our relationship was because we liked each other. That is why she always insisted

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that I call her by her first name—because we were *friends*. Besides, it didn't suit Alexandra to admit that she could have a granddaughter, or even a daughter old enough to have a job and an apartment of her own. Much better to be "such good friends."

Oh, Alexandra. The elaborate games she played, the deceptions she maintained in her pathetic attempt to hold on to her youth. I wiped my tears away and stuffed some clothes into my scuffed overnight bag. I gave the bag a sympathetic pat as I recalled how Alexandra's eyebrows went up the last time she saw it.

"My dear," she said, eyeing the bag as though it were carrying some loathsome disease instead of my clothes, "a good piece of luggage would be such a sensible investment."

I'd take my ratty old bag and my drip-dry clothes and drive to Sea Cliff, do whatever had to be done, and say goodbye to Alexandra.

I took the coast road, the slow road. I needed the extra time to sort my thoughts and prepare myself for the ordeal. I've never been very good at funerals. And my mind was too full of memories to attempt driving the freeway. Alexandra.

I used to tease her and call her the Czarina. It wasn't entirely out of place. She carried herself like an empress, head held high, back perfectly straight. She tried hard over the years to improve my slumping posture, to do something with my colorless hair and unattractive skin, but she never succeeded in making a beauty out of me. I was too willful, too stubborn, too homely. "You're the *image* of your father," she would sigh with disappointment.

Actually, I was grateful in a way that I had not been beautiful. My bony face and awkward body had saved me from Alexandra's special devils, from her terror of getting old.

It was this terror which drove her, dominated her. She had literally spent her life fighting the passage of time. What a futile contradiction! Poor Alexandra. I remembered her heroic efforts to hold on to her looks—the cosmetics and dyes, the artful clothes and youthful jewels. I remembered wondering uncharitably how often she'd had her face lifted. Of course she'd never tell me a thing like that. The problem with fighting off age is that it's such a lonely battle. One can have no allies. Alexandra shared the dreadful secret of her real age with no one. She monitored her speech, her letters, never once betraying any clues which might fix her in time, which might give away her secret.

Suddenly I came to with a start and pulled the car to the side of the road, for suddenly I realized that Alexandra's passion for secrecy

had affected me too. She had been my only relative and now she was gone without having told me anything of her background or of my own family. I didn't even know her maiden name! I was as cut off as a foundling left on a doorstep in a Victorian novel.

No, I was being theatrical. I had my memories of my parents, of Alexandra and Paul.

Paul was Alexandra's husband. He was tall, elegant, Continental, and many years younger than Alexandra. Come to think of it, Paul was probably the reason why Alexandra went to such extravagant lengths to conceal her right age. Once, shortly after my parents' death, the three of us were out walking together. A passerby mistook Paul for my father while correctly judging Alexandra to be my grandmother. She was furious, though Paul was only amused. He had been suave and a little distant, admirably suited to Alexandra, for neither of them revealed much of what they were thinking or feeling.

Paul had died some years back, just after I moved away on my own. It was a shocking thing: he and his assistant had been shot and killed in a robbery at his fashionable little jewelry store, La Boite des Bijoux. The police never found the killer or recovered the stolen gems.

Naturally I went back to be with Alexandra during that awful time. She was incredible. Poised and gracious, she gave no hint of the anguish I knew she was suffering. She assisted the police in every way she could, but she was remote, untouched by their hard manner. She became more and more the empress, the Czarina, frozen in a block of ice.

After Paul's death she never took off the Cartière Cross.

Paul had given it to her years before they were married. It was a superb example of the master craftsman's art—a brilliant cross of diamonds and emeralds set in platinum, and one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. She told me many times that it symbolized Paul's love for her.

The Sea Cliff mortician, a rigid little man who could have given even Paul lessons in self-assurance, was astonished when I said that Alexandra was to be buried wearing the Cartière Cross.

"But—but—it's—it's such a *valuable* piece!" he managed to sputter. I didn't care. It had meant more to Alexandra than it ever could to me.

After the simple, brief (thank God) burial service, I went back to

Alexandra's house to start the exhausting job of disposing of everything.

A person who confidently expects not to die doesn't make many plans for that contingency, so there was no will, no inventory of her possessions. I had a long job ahead of me.

I called in appraisers for most of her things, for I was completely incompetent to assess the value of the curios and art objects she'd collected over a lifetime of traveling and of loving jewels. It became obvious that even after the inheritance taxes were paid I'd be a wealthy woman, but that somehow was not much consolation. I'd rather have had Alexandra alive.

I saved Alexandra's bedroom for last. More than any other room in the house, this lovely feminine room belonged to her. Her impeccable taste and her love of beautiful things were expressed in the delicate furniture, the bed with its gracious proportions and spread of Brussels lace, the fragile graceful Louis XV chairs and dressing table.

The dressing table was a masterpiece of ornament and whimsical utility. Only Alexandra would have the courage to keep and use such a museum piece. It was intricately carved, inlaid with a dozen different woods and mother of pearl, swarming with drawers and compartments. Each compartment contained cosmetics and unguents, the weapons Alexandra wielded in her endless war on time.

I opened drawers at random. Here were eyelash curlers, sets of false eyelashes to curl, and mascara. Lipsticks in a whole palette of shades were in another drawer. A compartment held bottles of nail enamel. Alexandra could have opened up her own cosmetics shop, I thought with a nervous giggle.

Suddenly a piece of the inlay slid away under my fingers. I'd found an honest-to-God secret panel. Behind the sliding panel there was a space and a little drawer. The key to the drawer lay in the space, in a layer of dust. I inserted the key and it turned unwillingly. The drawer slid out freely, for all the rust on the lock, and overturned its contents onto the Oriental carpet with a metallic *thunk*. There at my feet was an ugly snubnosed gun.

My blood turned to icewater. A gun in Alexandra's dressing table? It looked like a coiled snake, just as venomous, just as incongruous. I dropped the little drawer to the carpet and saw that it wasn't completely empty. A piece of paper had been folded on the bottom, held there by the weight of the gun. I lifted it and read:

"Alexandra, this farce has gone on long enough. I'm finally leaving

DO IT YOURSELF

you. You can have everything—I will take only the shop. Claire and I will make a life for ourselves. Yes, my 'little shopgirl,' as you call her so cruelly, has shown me the meaning of love. She is pure and sweet and I love her. Since it no longer means anything to you, I'm also taking the Cartière Cross.

Paul”

“Q”

This is the 540th “first story” to be published by Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine . . . You’d be surprised what you hear at the neighborhood bar . . .

The author, Michael J. Oelrich, was born in Chicago in 1958 and has lived there all his life. At the time he submitted his first story he was employed as a shipping clerk. But in his spare time he “plays keyboards and writes music for a semi-professional rock group.” And during kite-flying season he flies one of his “multitude of kites,” many of his own design and manufacture . . .

DO IT YOURSELF

by MICHAEL J. OELRICH

66 **D**o it yourself! Do it yourself! You’re cheap, Harry, that’s why you always want to do it yourself! Self-satisfaction, indeed. You just want to save yourself a couple of bucks, that’s all!”

My wife’s words stung like ice. She was being unreasonable again. “Listen, Agnes. That plumber wanted forty bucks an hour. Besides, he said he couldn’t make it until next week. What are we gonna do until then, take swimming lessons?”

“Sure, you got an answer for everything. What about when you painted the house all by yourself? You still haven’t finished the back yet.”

“Who’s gonna see the back? You want me to stop with the leaky

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pipes and go finish the painting? Is that what you want?"

It went on like that interminably. It always goes on like that until one of us (me) storms out of the house. So naturally that's what I did this time.

I took my usual seat at Bill's Pine Grove Tap and ordered a beer. "You know, Bill"—Bill is the owner and bartender and we were the only ones in the place—"wives can be a real pain."

"I know what you mean. I used to have a lot of problems with my Beatrice, before she died."

I was embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. I guess I should have kept my big yap shut." I felt terrible. Bill's wife had been killed by a hit-and-run driver about two years back. They never did catch the guy who did it.

"Don't worry about it, Harry. Beatrice was a bitch."

"That's no way to talk about your late wife. I mean respect for the dead, and all that."

Bill laughed. I was shocked. His wife had died horribly and here he was laughing about it. He said, "Harry, I was married to her for twenty-two years. I stopped loving her after the first year. Sometimes I wonder if I ever loved her. I think the only reason I married her was for her money. She got a big inheritance when her father died, and I needed the money to buy this place. Next thing you know, I was engaged."

I had never seen this aspect of Bill. I knew he'd been henpecked and even possibly that he hadn't loved his wife, but I never thought he actually hated her, the way I hate my Agnes. And oh, how I hate my Agnes!

"This might sound like a callous thing to say," I said, "but I wish my wife would get run down like yours did."

"Why's that?"

"She's always nagging me. I try to save us a few bucks by doing something myself instead of bringing in some high-priced specialist who'd probably botch the job anyway, and she complains. She tells me I'm cheap."

"I think you're right, Harry. Why pay somebody else to botch a job when you can botch it yourself."

"You're starting to sound like Agnes."

"Sorry."

"So am I. I wish I could be lucky like you."

Bill snorted. "Luck had nothing to do with it."

"I'm talking about your wife getting hit by a car."

"So am I. Luck had nothing to do with it."

"You mean *you* killed your wife?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Oh. For a second you had me worried there. I didn't think—"

"I hired someone to do it for me."

For a moment I wasn't sure I had heard him right. "You what?"

"You heard me."

He was kidding. He *had* to be kidding. I studied his face, and then I realized he wasn't kidding.

"You mean you paid somebody to kill your wife? A hit man?"

"That's right."

"Where did you find him?"

"Oh, I've got certain connections. Running a bar you meet all kinds of interesting people."

I thought a moment.

"How much did it cost?" I asked.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars, and worth every penny of it. It was like buying my freedom. Of course with inflation maybe the price has gone up some, just like everything else. Why? You thinking of having Agnes knocked off?"

I couldn't believe how casual he was being about this. I thought about his question. I wasn't sure myself whether or not I could go through with something like that. I mean twenty-five hundred bucks is a lot of dough . . .

Twenty-five hundred bucks was too much. I wouldn't pay it. That's why I borrowed these law books from the prison library. You should see the prices those lawyers charge. I figure I can put together just as good a murder defense right here in my cell.

"Q"

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

CRIME DOSSIER: One of the greatest innovations in the publishing history of mystery and detective fiction occurred in the 1930s when the British publishing firm of Hutchinson created the crime dossier. Conceived and planned by J. G. Links and written by Dennis Wheatley, *Murder Off Miami* was the first of four such volumes, and they enjoyed an incredible success until the difficulties imposed by the outbreak of World War II killed the concept.

In a copy inscribed by Dennis Wheatley some years ago, he exulted that more than 120,000 copies of the first book had been sold in the first few months after its publication. Unlike anything published before, the crime dossier told a detective story exactly the way a detective would have solved a case (or at least it all *seemed* terribly authentic). If a detective uncovered a clue, such as a matchstick or a bloodstained piece of fabric, that clue was bound in the dossier. If a telegram revealed a fact, or a pho-

tograph provided information, it was part of the dossier. As the final gimmick, the last several pages were sealed so that one could not be certain of the solution unless he broke the seal.

It was believed that no one could ever again produce this type of book because of the phenomenal price increases in publishing, but—as cited here a few issues earlier by Chris Steinbrunner—the first dossier, *Murder Off Miami*, has just been published by Mayflower Books in the United States. It is hard to say whether or not the price (\$14.95) is high; after all, it is impossible to compare it with anything else being published today. With the cost of ordinary books more than ten dollars as often as not, this book must be regarded as one of the finest gift ideas (for *any* mystery fan) of the year. It is more than worth its price as a conversation piece.

HOLMES AGAIN: Another reprint worthy of note is *The Adventure of the Eleven Cuff-Buttons* by James Francis Thierry

(The Aspen Press, Box 4119, Boulder, CO 80306, \$6.50). This handsome paperback, issued in an edition of only 1,000 copies, makes available again (after 61 years) the first full-length Sherlock Holmes parody. While short stories parodying Holmes are legion (the best compilation still being Ellery Queen's *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes*,

long out of print and now very expensive), novel-length episodes in the great detective's life were unusual until recent years. It is a one-joke book (Holmes and the other Britishers use American slang with regularity—or, rather, irregularity) but it's an amusing joke and the book has historical significance which exceeds its readability.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by **CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

Other directors may have excelled in chase sequences, or in creating suspense, but Fritz Lang—who died in 1976 at the age of 86—was a trailblazer in the genre of *film noir*. His contribution to the mystery film was enormous. Although the range of his work extended to westerns (*Western Union*) and even to landmark science-fiction (*Metropolis*, *Frau in Mond*), the screen mystery in his hands explored fresh territory and expanded its limits, and Lang throughout his career was closely identified with it. An excellent retrospective of the director and his work is now to be found in cinema historian Frederick W. Ott's *The Films of Fritz Lang* (Citadel, \$17.95), in the pages of which we can prowl Lang's shadowy, menacing screen world across four decades.

Friedrich Christian Anton

Lang's first great achievement was the creation—in the troubled Germany of 1922—of the hypnotic master criminal, Dr. Mabuse, who commands legions of agents, wanders everywhere in a variety of disguises, and plays with human destiny. At the finish of *Dr. Mabuse Der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*), his organization crushed by a courageous public prosecutor, he goes insane. Lang's next thriller was an extravagant spy story (*Spione*, 1928), in which a crippled bank director heads an international espionage ring dealing in government documents. The film climaxes in a spectacular train crash.

Lang's first all-talking melodrama was among his very best motion pictures. *M* (1931) tells how the city of Berlin—both its police and underworld—are roused against a child-murderer, brilliantly played by a tormented,

pathetic Peter Lorre in the role that was to give him international fame. "In those days," Lang recalled, "I was working with the Scotland Yard of Berlin, the Alexanderplatz, and I saw many, many cases of murder, almost immediately." *M* is a film of dark and overwhelming power, and Lang followed it with a return to Mabuse.

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933) finds the master criminal, aged, insane, in a mental institution, but his hypnotic power has taken over the mind of the asylum's director, compelling him into horrible crimes. The latter sets up a vast underworld organization, continuing it even after Mabuse dies in his cell—until his own mind crumbles. Thought by some to be on one level a political indictment of growing Nazi violence, the film hastened Lang's emigration to the United States.

His first two American films—*Fury* with its lynch mob and *You Only Live Once* with its driven fugitive lovers—are Depression sagas of grim eloquence. In 1941, however, after being sidetracked by a few westerns, Lang triumphed with a return to the espionage genre with his masterful adaptation of Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*. Called *Man Hunt*, it pits English sportsman Walter Pidgeon against Gestapo hunter George Sanders—archetypes of democracy and dictatorship, but with the best lines going to the Other Side, as in Sanders' sneering "We play the game to win." Lang would deal with spies again

in *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) and in the marvelous *Ministry of Fear* (1945), successfully wrestled from Graham Greene's novel, with Ray Milland finding microfilm in a frosted cake and murder at a séance. *Cloak and Dagger* (1946) closes out the war—with a memorable shot of an old woman wielding a machinegun.

But Lang moved into other areas as well. *The Woman in the Window* (1944) had Edward G. Robinson illustrate what dark things can happen when a mild, middle-aged man lowers his guard for just one moment with a pretty stranger. Again, in *Scarlet Street* (1945), Robinson, as a bookkeeper, is driven to killing his taunting mistress. *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) is a psychological gothic thriller with *Rebecca* overtones—including a mansion going up in flames at the end—but Michael Redgrave is wondrously sinister as an architect who for kicks creates replicas of murder rooms.

Other crime films followed (among them *The House by the River* and *The Blue Gardenia*, from a Vera Caspary mystery) but Lang was to achieve his best work in adapting William P. McGivern's novel about a rogue cop taking on the Mafia, *The Big Heat* (1953). Tight, tough, very human, with Lang's very Germanic vision of an all-powerful underworld, it is a melodrama masterpiece. Glenn Ford stars.

Even toward the finish of his career Lang made respectable

mysteries (*While the City Sleeps*, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*). His last film brought him back to Germany and Mabuse. Again the master criminal's blueprints for conquest posthumously inspire another madman in *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1961);

the film itself inspired a vogue of Mabuse sequels in Germany directed by lesser hands.

The films of Fritz Lang, as chronicled by Ott in his book, are worthy of your attention—the creator of Mabuse and *M* should not quickly be forgotten.

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INTERVIEW: MARY HIGGINS CLARK (2)

This concludes the interview begun in the December 17th issue of *EQMM*.

EQMM: If you had to define the common thread in your books that make them mysteries, what would it be?

CLARK: I like to think of them as crossword puzzles. Every character has a piece of the puzzle in his or her hand. If they would only open their hands, show what they have, reveal what they know, the mystery would be solved. Life is much like that: happenstance, the missed bus, the coincidence. I go to a lot of trials and see evidence of this all the time.

EQMM: What kind of trials?

CLARK: Murder trials. They are so fascinating, and I don't mean it in a cold-blooded way. But if you're going to be a writer you should know the emotions of everybody involved. The victims are not the only people involved in a crime. The families of victims live it, too. For example, I just saw a young husband go to

the witness stand—he was very calm, well mannered, typical British well born (in the fine sense of the word). The prosecutor said: "Do you remember the night of October 3, 1975?" and he replied, "I shall never forget it." The little things that a writer can never make up: "When did you first suspect a problem?" "The instant I came home. The garage door was open. The car was parked as I had left it; Susan parked it differently. She would not have left the garage door open and just walked into the house." "What else?" "In the bedroom there was a box with a tampon in it. I never even knew where Susan kept them. She never left an article like that for me to see." You cannot make things like that up as a writer. You hear what people say and adapt it.

EQMM: Your first two books were about children in jeopardy. Is the next one also about that?

CLARK: No, not about a child in peril, really, but it is concerned with the desire of women to have children. So there are, in

a sense, children in jeopardy, but not in a kidnap situation. The obstetrician is the murderer.

EQMM: You're not giving away the ending, are you?

CLARK: No, that appears on

the first page, where an obstetrician is in the process of murdering one of his pregnant patients. What I hope to do in this book is have every woman who goes to an obstetrician wonder!

THE JURY BOX

by **JON L. BREEN**

Certainly all readers of *EQMM* must be aware of the excellent series of anthologies regularly drawn from this magazine's pages. The latest one, however, has a special attraction even for those fortunate owners of a complete file of back issues. *Ellery Queen's Anthology*, Fall-Winter 1979 (Davis Publications, \$2.25), Volume 38 of the series, includes a short novel by Erle Stanley Gardner, "The Clue of the Screaming Woman," that has not appeared in *EQMM* or anywhere else since its original publication in *Country Gentleman* in 1949. Featuring Sheriff Bill Eldon, whose only book appearance was the 1947 collection, *Two Clues*, the case is typical Gardner: fast-moving, well-plotted, and reflecting a love of the outdoors.

The anthology also offers a full measure of seventeen stories from past issues of *EQMM*, including a trio by Edward D. Hoch.

Another presumably known quantity is Roald Dahl, one of the very best writers of ironic sting-in-the-tail crime short stories. Anyone who has missed him

up to now should seek out his new collection, *Tales of the Unexpected* (Random House-Vintage, \$2.95), though long-time fans will discover that only two of the 24 tales, "The Umbrella Man" and "The Butler," have not appeared in earlier Dahl collections. Some, like the unforgettable "Lamb to the Slaughter," have been repeatedly anthologized.

*** Stephen Knight: *Rogano*, Doubleday, \$10.00. The author of *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* (1976), one of the best argued if seemingly farthest-fetched theories of the White-chapel killer's identity, presents a wild and crazy amalgam of detection, reincarnation, and the predictions of Nostradamus in his first novel. Reminiscent in style and subject matter of some of Colin Wilson's fiction, with a hint here and there of John Dickson Carr's influence, the tale is consistently fascinating if ultimately unbelievable, even on its own terms. The plot involves a series of killings in 1902 London that strangely parallel another series in Rogano, Italy, in 1454.

*** Thomas Chastain: *High Voltage*, Doubleday, \$8.95. A series of selective blackouts (of the Criminal Courts Building, World Trade Center, and police headquarters) strike Manhattan, and the gang responsible demands \$3,000,000 ransom. Inspector Max Kauffman heads the forces of good in a very exciting and suspenseful procedural.

*** Velda Johnston: *The People from the Sea*, Dodd, Mead, \$8.95. Here is an utterly compelling gothic by a writer who seems to get better and better. When a young woman recovering from a mild mental breakdown rents an old Long Island farmhouse for the summer, she encounters ghosts that simultaneously make her feel welcome and cause her to doubt her sanity.

*** John Ball: *The Murder Children*, Dodd, Mead, \$8.95. This intensively researched novel of Chicano gangs in Southern California offers its author's usual sure-footed technique and authentic procedural details, and the final shock is very effectively done. On the debit side, the book sometimes reads a little too much like a public-relations handout for the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, and the attitude toward the Mexican-American community seems somewhat patronizing.

*** Lawrence Block: *The Burglar Who Liked To Quote Kipling*, Random House, \$7.95. Now in the used-book business but still a felon at heart, Bernie Rhodenbarr steals a rare Kipling first edition from the home of an

eclectic collector and winds up solving another murder. As expected, it's fast, light, and ingenious with nothing to suggest it gave its author any difficulty in the writing. See, however, Block's entertaining manual, *Writing the Novel* (Writer's Digest, \$10.95), which uses this book as an example several times.

** John Russo: *The Majorettes*, Pocket Books, \$1.95. A seemingly mad killer stalks high-school majorettes in an unpleasant and exploitative but fairly readable sex-and-sadism opus. The striking cover illustration of a baton-twirling skeleton is much better than the story inside.

** Erica Quest: *The October Cabaret*, Doubleday-Crime Club, \$7.95. Heroine inherits Brighton antique shop from uncle, meets danger and romance. This is very traditional romantic suspense, including an exasperatingly unnecessary misunderstanding between the male and female leads. The novel is decently executed, though, ranking somewhere between a good Dorothy Daniels and a relatively weak Rae Foley.

** Jacquemard-Sénécal: *The Eleventh Little Indian*, Dodd, Mead, \$8.95. Translated by Gordon Latta. In homage to Agatha Christie, the authors of this French mystery bump off the whole cast save one of a revival of *Ten Little Indians*. The survivor plays Hastings to police detective Hector Parescot, no Poirot clone despite his name. It's an interesting enough puzzle but ultimately demonstrates

how hard it is to do successfully what Christie made look so easy.
** Philip Owen: *Mystery at a Country Inn*, Berkshire Traveller Press, \$7.95. Here we have an old friend under a new name. Though the style and craftsmanship of Hugh Pentecost (Judson Philips) are unmistakable, the account of murder in New England's Red Cardinal Inn lacks the pace and urgency of his best works. The least-suspected-person windup is nicely done, if not a complete surprise.

Completist collectors of this author should also know about

a recent reprint of the 1934 pulp novelet, *The Hawk*, by Judson P. Philips, first of a series called Attic Revivals (Bernard A. Drew, 53 Gilmore St., Great Barrington, MA 01230, \$1.50). The 16-page pamphlet also includes a brief but fascinating interview with Philips. The story, admittedly a far cry in terms of quality from the author's later work, introduced a crime-fighting group called the Park Avenue Hunt Club, one of whose members is an earlier and somewhat different version of John Jericho, well known to EQMM readers.

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"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

CUI BONO?

by CAROLYN T. CREW

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

(continued)

This is the tramp
Who owned the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cop with the cynical eyes
Who arrested the tramp
Who owned the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is Jack's widow, who told all those lies
To the underpaid cop with the cynical eyes
Who arrested the tramp
Who owned the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the jury that wasn't so wise
In acquitting Jack's widow, who told all those lies
To the underpaid cop with the cynical eyes
Who arrested the tramp
Who owned the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the lawyer who since Jack's demise
Has claimed both Jack's house and his widow as prize
For selecting the jury that wasn't so wise
In acquitting Jack's widow, who told all those lies
To the underpaid cop with the cynical eyes
Who arrested the tramp
Who owned the knife
That was stuck in the corpse
That lay in the house that Jack built.

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THE LAST FULL MEASURE

by **HUGH PENTECOST**

(continued from page 68)

It was daylight when I reached the nearest police station. I tried to explain the situation to the desk sergeant, who was red-eyed with fatigue. He listened with apparent patience, but I had a feeling he only half heard. He told me that every available man was on duty in the streets, trying to keep order. They couldn't go looking for missing persons; there were probably thousands of them in Washington this morning.

"But this is murder! Attempted murder, at the very least!" I said.

"Where is the victim?" the man asked.

"That's the person who's missing."

"No body?"

"No."

He was obviously helpless to do anything, but he must have seen that my distress was very real. "If your brother was wounded and in uniform he might have got into one of the emergency hospitals," he said. "The wounded have already started coming in by train from the battle area. I can tell you where some of them are located."

It was the only lead I had, except Blades, and Blades seemed to have vanished into thin air. I checked at the hotel once more, this time with the manager. He insisted he had never seen anyone matching my description.

And so I began a search of the emergency hospitals. It was a forlorn hope. There were no records. The overworked doctors had no time to talk to one man looking for a missing brother, when hundreds of people crowded outside, all hoping to get news of a loved one.

I had a feeling that last night's jubilation had died down in the city. There was no real news, but rumors began to come through that perhaps McClellan's victory had not been quite so complete as first reports had indicated.

By late afternoon every bone in my body was aching. I had cov-

ered the last of the hospitals, without any luck. But just as I was about to leave the last place an exhausted-looking orderly tapped me on the shoulder.

"There's a new batch just coming in, sir," he said. "I understand most of them are from the First New York Cavalry."

It was clutching at straws to wait, but I clutched. There was a slim hope that Greg's assailant might have tried to make it seem that Greg had been wounded with his own unit.

I stood back against the corridor wall as stretchers were brought in and placed on the floors. Then I went from stretcher to stretcher, looking for Greg. Some of the men were in less serious state than others, and I spoke to one of these.

"Do you know Lieutenant Cantwell?" I asked.

"Lucky fellow," the man said, forcing a grin. "He was on leave when the action started."

I tried another, who just shook his head. Either he didn't know Greg or was in too much pain to make the effort at recalling when he'd last seen him.

A third man gave me the same answer, "He was on leave."

There seemed no point in going on with this, and I started toward the front door when someone called my name.

I turned, and saw a young man whom I knew lying on a stretcher near the door. He was a friend of Greg's, a Captain Brannick. He was about Greg's age. He lay on his back, staring at me, with unashamed tears running down his face. I went to him, and as I bent over him he turned his head to one side and his whole body shook with sobs. I knelt down beside him.

"Easy, son. Easy," I said.

"It's the same old story," he said, in a choking voice. "Victory within our grasp, and we lose it. We had Lee and Jackson separated. If we'd brought up our center and kept them from joining forces the war would be over!... But he wouldn't move! *He wouldn't move!*"

"Who, son?"

"McClellan! 'He's got the slows'—that's what Mr. Lincoln said. 'He's got the slows!' So we've lost the best chance we may ever have. And the dead and wounded—my friends—all for nothing!" He turned on me, angrily: "Go ahead! Report what I said. They'll court-martial me. Let them!"

"All right, Brannick. Get it out of your system," I said. "Are you badly hurt?"

"My leg," he said. "I'm lucky, I'm out of it for a long time." Then a shadow crossed his face. "Why should I burden you with my troubles, Mr. Cantwell? You're looking for Greg, aren't you?"

"He won't be here," I said. "He wasn't at the front with his regiment."

"But he was, sir! He may very well be here."

My heart thudded against my ribs.

"You're mistaken," I said.

"I'm not, sir. I saw him myself."

"When?"

"A few hours ago. They were carrying me in from a field dressing station to the railroad. I saw Greg—I tried to call to him."

A few hours ago! I tried to keep my voice steady. "This was last night?"

"It was after daylight this morning, sir. He was sitting propped against a tree. The dirty Rebels had stripped him of his sword. He sat there with his head slumped over to one side. I couldn't tell if he was wounded badly, or if he'd just fallen asleep from exhaustion. The fighting had moved on from that place. There were just the wounded and the dead."

"Where was this place?"

"Antietam, sir. Antietam Creek. I begged the stretcher bearers to stop for him. We were very near the field hospital. They wouldn't. They had to get me to the hospital train, they said. They promised to take care of him on their way back."

Antietam Creek. Somehow Greg had reached the battlefield after the violence in my rooms!

I don't think I'll forget the next hour as long as I live, Katherine. If ever again I think of myself as a person of importance or influence I'll remember that hour. I went to the War Department to get a pass to the front lines. I had friends there, but they were helpless to do anything for me.

They told me, "Thousands of people as important as you, Richard, are raising heaven and earth to get through to the front lines. They've had to barricade the roads this morning leading to the battlefield."

"But I've got to get there!"

"Sorry. An order from Secretary Stanton, or General Halleck, or Old Abe himself is all that would do it."

"Where can I find one of them?"

"My dear Richard, don't be absurd."

But I was going to find Greg. Darkness had come while I argued with my friends at the Department. I went to the railroad station, with the idea that I might send a telegraph message to Greg's commanding officer, asking where he was. The station was jammed with people wanting to send messages, but the telegraph lines had all been commandeered by the Army. Army sentries were posted around the railroad yards.

I walked out onto the main platform. Across the tracks I could see the red glow from the firebox of a waiting engine and heard the hiss of escaping steam. Trailing out behind the engine, ghostly in the murky light from the station lamps, was a string of freight cars. The fireman was fueling the open firebox of the engine.

Someone spoke, off to my left in the darkness. "It's a hospital train," the voice said, "heading back to pick up more wounded."

My hand closed over my stick. I looked quickly around me, then stepped out across the tracks toward the train. At the same moment I saw a trackman waving an oil lantern as a signal to the train's engineer. There was a clatter of couplings as the engine moved, jolting the freight cars in its wake. Silhouetted against the sky I saw a brakeman, loosening the brake wheel of a car. The train was moving.

I cannot run as other men run. I hopped, pushing myself with my stick, stumbling over rails. I heard someone shout behind me, and the crack of a sentry's rifle split the night air. But I could not have presented much of a target in the black fog.

The cars were moving past me, fairly rapidly now. I dropped my cane. Suddenly I made a lunge and caught the rung of an iron ladder at the end of a car. I thought my arms would be yanked out of their sockets. My feet dragged cruelly in the cinder bed.

Using every ounce of strength I had, I pulled myself up, inch by inch, until my foot connected with the bottom rung of the ladder and I was safe. I clung there for a moment, gasping for breath. Then I leaned out to see if they were still pursuing me.

The distance of a car behind me a man was running along beside the train, looking for a chance to board it as I had. He grabbed at a passing ladder. His body jerked outward, and then smashed against the side of the car. As long as I live I'll never forget the sound of his scream as he fell.

Somehow a signal had reached the engineer, and we came to a

grinding stop. I clung where I was, icy sweat running down inside my clothes. I heard voices, and the sound of men running up behind me to where my pursuer had been crushed under the wheels of the train. I knew they would come looking for me in a moment.

Then I realized that the fog had done me a service. The sentry who had fired his rifle at me imagined that only one of us had attempted to board the train. He thought I was the man who had fallen. There was going to be no search for me. The conductor was saying that the train must get under way.

"There are wounded waiting to be brought in," I heard him say. "If some fool risks his life trying to get out to the battlefield we can't let it delay us."

"Funny," another voice said. "From these papers in his wallet it seems he was an Inspector of the City Police Force."

"Police officer?"

"Yes," the voice said. "Name of George Blades."

I had hooked my good leg and an arm through the rungs of the ladder, and I hung there as the train jolted forward once more. George Blades—a police officer! His very presence there in the railroad yard must have meant that he had spent the whole laborious day following me. He had died trying to follow me now. Why? What interest did the Washington police have in me?

It is a strange thing, Katherine, but as I clung precariously to the ladder of the moving freight car, strength began to come back to me. I didn't stop to analyze the reason for it then, but I think I know now where it came from. All the night before, and all the day that had gone by, I had lived with the hope Greg was alive. I had been tortured by the anxiety that I would not find him in time to help him. Now I knew I was too late.

I knew that Greg had not been sleeping when Brannick saw him sitting there, propped against a tree. I knew the retreating Rebels had not stripped him of his sword. I knew he was dead. He had been murdered and carried to the battlefield, where death would be a commonplace. All whom I had ever loved were dead: my mother, my father, my brother. The anxiety that had made me weak was gone; in its place was a cold determined rage to find the murderer and bring him to justice. That anger was like a tonic.

You proceed a step at a time, I told myself. First, you must have the evidence of murder. Then you go back on the murderer's tracks till you find him. Time enough then to investigate the un-

answered questions. Time enough then to find the explanation for George Blades, for Sybil Gaul, for the government clerk who called himself Kenneth Whalen, for the two men who assaulted me on a darkened Washington street, for Muncrief and Kennedy.

First, the evidence of murder must be positive, conclusive. Forgive me if I put down the gruesome facts, Katherine. The murderer had made one mistake: he had left the handle of that Florentine letter opener on the floor of my hotel room. Without that I'd have had no evidence of violence there. Now, if I could find the blade, I would have conclusive proof. I thought I knew where I would find it.

I was not a man who loved any more. I was not a man who felt pain in my numbed arm and leg. I hung where I was for what seemed hour upon hour as the train jolted through the night. It may be that I passed out from time to time, in exhaustion.

I know that I suddenly woke to realization that the train had come to a halt. I could hear the sound of many voices, and there was light from moving torches and from a dozen or more fires built along the tracks.

The arm and leg with which I had fastened myself to the train were like dead things. I had to lift them with my free arm to get them loose, and when I did I fell down onto the trackbed between the cars, unable to move them. I did manage to crawl free of the tracks, and to lie there in the cinders while my circulation returned, slowly, painfully.

I heard enough as I lay there to realize that this was the point where the wounded from the day's battle were being loaded onto the train. Brannick's stretcher bearers had been carrying him to the train when he'd seen Greg propped against a tree "very near the field hospital." I finally managed to get to my feet and hobble away.

No one paid any attention to me, even though I was a civilian. There seemed to be many others, volunteers in the work with the wounded. I went unnoticed and unchallenged about my grim business.

I will not distress you here with a description of the battlefield. The fighting had carried well beyond this place, but the evidences of it were all around us. The wounded lay moaning and crying out in the dark; others lay silent, either dead or dropped from exhaustion. There were cannon which had broken down or been smashed by enemy shells. And over the sound of voices a curious and

ominous stillness from the blackness beyond.

There was no fighting now. Armies faced each other across a curtain of night, waiting for another bloody day to dawn.

I stopped a wounded soldier limping toward the tracks. "Where are they burying the dead?" I asked.

He looked at me as if I were mad, and burst into hysterical-sounding laughter. I trudged on. There was no field hospital I could find. Perhaps it had been moved forward closer to the next day's fighting. But I did see two or three tents, lighted from within by oil lamps, and I saw wounded being taken there. They were evidently temporary dressing stations. Once, from behind a canvas flap, I heard a man screaming in agony. I shut my ears to it, my ears and my heart.

"Where are they burying the dead?"

Finally someone directed me into a wooded copse. I have tried to blot the picture out of my mind. A half-dozen men, stripped to the waist, dug a great hole by the light of a single oil lamp. They were sweat-drenched, their beards matted, their eyes sunk into their heads. And around the pit, dumped there like discarded sacks of meal, were their dead comrades.

That was where I found Greg.

It was his ring I saw first—the gold signet ring that had belonged to my father. It was on the finger of a hand stretched out from under a pile of the dead. I moved the covering bodies. The men in the pit paid no attention to me, if they saw me at all.

At last I looked down into Greg's face. Someone had closed his eyes. The face was peaceful, Katherine; the end must have been mercifully swift and sudden.

I found the strength to lift him in my arms. I held him close for a moment, his brown curls against my shoulder. I had held him that way the day I returned from the fatal voyage that had cost my parents their lives. Only, that day Greg had wept.

One of the men in the pit saw me now.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Even if he is a friend of yours you must leave him here. That's the regulations."

"There's been a mistake," I said. "This one is still alive."

I don't know whether he believed me. I learned later that many distracted relatives had slipped through the lines, hoping to save their loved ones from a mass burial. At any rate, he was too tired to protest further.

I carried Greg back the way I had come. I do not know whether

he was heavy or light. I remember only fixing my eyes on the light from one of those dressing-station tents and walking toward it. When I reached it a half dozen stretchers were on the ground outside, with wounded men upon them.

Inside, a doctor worked on a man stretched out on an ordinary kitchen table. Another man, a civilian, stood with his back to me, holding the patient down on the table. I walked quietly into the tent, still holding Greg in my arms.

The doctor finished with the man on the table, and he and his volunteer assistant lifted him to a stretcher at the far side of the tent. The doctor turned back and saw me.

He was a young man with a face a thousand years old. His hands trembled and the sweat ran down his face. I walked forward and put Greg's body down on the kitchen table.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said, in a hollow voice. "He'll have to wait his turn. There are others outside—"

"You'll examine him now," I said. I had noticed an army rifle standing in the corner of the tent. I took a step toward it and picked it up. "I'm sorry, Doctor, but this is urgent."

The doctor's assistant turned quickly from the stretcher. His face was blackened from gunpowder. "Cantwell!" he said.

When he spoke I knew him. It was Paul Muncrief, your father's war correspondent. He took a quick step to the table and looked down. "Your brother!" he said.

The doctor bent over Greg and then turned to me. "I'm sorry," he said. "There's nothing I can do. This man has been dead for some time."

"There is something you can and must do," I said.

"Cantwell, are you out of your head?" Muncrief demanded.

I paid no attention to him. "This man has a knife wound over his heart, Doctor," I said. "I want you to examine him to see if there is any other wound that could have proved fatal."

"There are men out there who need help!" the doctor said, wiping the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

"Then don't waste time talking," I said. "Assume that I'm crazy if you like. I am crazy enough to use this gun if you don't do what I say."

The doctor shrugged and stripped away Greg's coat and shirt. After a moment or two he said, "There is only the wound over his heart. Are you satisfied?"

"Probe the wound," I said.

"What!"

"Probe the wound, Doctor."

"Cantwell, what has come over you?" Muncrief said.

The doctor was a practical man. Time was of the essence. It would save time to humor me. Once again he bent over Greg. When he straightened, he held something in his hand which he was wiping off with a cloth. "This is what killed him, if that's what concerns you," he said. And he held out to me the broken blade of the letter opener.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said. "And now I'd like you to write down a statement of exactly what you've found. Perhaps Mr. Muncrief will do it for you. I want you to state that there was no other wound, and that the blade of a letter opener in the wound was the only cause of death."

"What is this, Cantwell?" Muncrief cried.

There was ice in place of my heart as I wrapped the broken blade of the letter opener in my handkerchief and put it in my pocket. "Do I need to tell you, Mr. Muncrief? My brother was murdered last night in my rooms at the National Hotel. He was murdered and then brought here."

"Brought *here*! But why—?"

"Again I'm not certain I need to tell you, Muncrief. But if you wanted to hide a body, where better could you do it than on a field of battle?"

Muncrief appeared stunned. "But who killed your brother, Cantwell? And why?"

"I can't answer either of those questions yet," I said. "But I do know that only three people could have known that Greg would be at my hotel when he was, and why. And you are one of those three people."

He stared at me with his mouth hanging open.

"Now be good enough," I said, "to write down a statement for the doctor to sign. And you shall witness it, Muncrief—which may be an extraordinary touch of irony."

He hesitated a moment, then wrote down a statement on a piece of paper he took from the pocket of his coat. It was brief and to the point. The doctor signed it, and Muncrief witnessed it.

"I'm sorry for the melodrama, Doctor," I said, "but without it a murderer might have got away with his crime." I felt my throat muscles tighten as I nodded toward Greg's body. "He must be buried in a mass grave?"

"Those are the regulations," the doctor said.

I picked Greg up and carried him back to the place where I had found him. I placed him gently in a bed of leaves. They had already started lowering the bodies into the pit. I crouched beside Greg, my hand covering his, until they came and took him.

I walked back toward the railroad track, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. I now had the proof of murder. Had I been an hour later it would have been lost to me. It almost seemed as if Providence were on my side. My preoccupation was such that I didn't hear Muncrief until he put his hand on my arm.

He had cleaned the smoke-black from his face and I saw that it was deathly pale. "I want to get one thing straight with you," he said. "I didn't like your brother. For selfish reasons. I am in love with Katherine. I don't know what that wild talk of yours meant, but if you were hinting that I might have killed him, you're wrong. I did not."

"We shall see," I said.

"How did you get out here?" he asked.

"I managed to board a returning hospital train," I said. "Why?"

"How do you expect to get back?"

"The way I came."

"That won't be necessary," he said. "I can arrange for you to ride back in the caboose of the train with me."

"Your credentials give you the privilege of coming and going through the lines at will?" I asked.

"Yes." Then he must have realized what I was thinking. "Now, look here, Cantwell. You said back there that only three people knew where your brother might be when he was killed, and that I was one of them. Who are the others?"

I looked straight at him. "One of them is Katherine," I said. "It seems unlikely to me, Muncrief, that she murdered the man she loved, or, if she did, that she could have moved him, wounded or dead, out here to the battlefield."

"Don't be absurd!" he said sharply. "Of course she didn't!"

"The other," I said, "is Kennedy, the horse dealer, who never laid eyes on Greg, so far as I know, till that night we met at the Willis home."

"Why should Kennedy want to murder your brother?"

"I can think of no personal reason," I said.

We stood there, Muncrief and I, staring at each other.

"And Katherine is my motive?" he asked.

"She is one of the two possible motives you may have had," I said.

"And the other?"

"Greg had a secret which he told to Katherine," I said. "Either you or Kennedy might have overheard it in the telling. If you did overhear it you would have known that Greg would be at my rooms in the National five nights later. He told his secret to Katherine that night at the Willises'. You and Kennedy were the other persons in the house. One of you must have overheard."

"There is a butler and half a dozen house servants," Muncrief said.

I didn't answer him.

"This secret—it would have provided both Kennedy and me with the same motive? How? I don't know Kennedy. I've never had any contact or dealings with him."

I looked him straight in the eye. "Traitors don't need to know each other," I said.

I thought he would strike me, but he didn't. "So that's the way it is," he said quietly.

His shoulders seemed to sag. Then he raised his head as we heard the sound of an engine bell. "There's a train pulling out," he said. "Let's go."

"I'm not sure it would be safe for me to accept your assistance," I said.

"Don't be a fool," he said, taking me by the arm.

He passed me off glibly to the train's conductor. He said I was connected with *The Dispatch*, had lost my papers while helping with the wounded, and that he would vouch for me.

The caboose of the train had two hard wooden benches built on either side of a potbellied stove in which a coal fire glowed. I was grateful for the warmth. Muncrief and I were the only passengers. The conductor and the train crew were evidently riding forward to help with the wounded. Muncrief offered me a cigar, which I refused.

"I remember our conversation that night we met," he said after a while. "Do you know what's happened out here in the last forty-eight hours? McClellan had Lee at his mercy. He had the Confederates split. He engaged their right and their left at will. He could have destroyed the left if he'd moved rapidly, but he gave Jackson a chance to get there with reinforcements. He could

have struck at their center and destroyed them. He delayed. He will call it a victory. The Confederates have been driven out of Maryland, but their army is intact. He let Lee off the hook."

I cared nothing about McClellan or the war any longer. I looked at this young man and wondered. Heaven help him if he was the murderer. Suddenly he leaned forward.

"Greg Cantwell meant nothing but tragedy for me," he said. "He meant I'd lost Katherine. But I'll help you find his killer, because if you don't find him Katherine will suspect me, as you do."

"You're very disarming, Mr. Muncrief," I said.

"You still think it may be me?"

I didn't answer.

"It would take some doing, but I can account for every hour of my time for the last two days."

Still I didn't answer, and he turned angrily away.

When we reached Washington my impulse was to come straight to you, Katherine, with the news I had. But time seemed vital to me. I was not afraid Muncrief would get away from me. He was too well-known. Besides, if he disappeared it would prove a case against him. Kennedy was another matter. He might be heading west; he could be lost to me forever in the wilderness.

I had to go to the police, because I had to insure the facts. I had been struck down once on the street; it could happen to me again. I was referred to a Captain Dougherty, who listened to my story, and accepted from me the broken blade of the letter opener and the witnessed statement of the army surgeon.

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Cantwell, you've done an astonishing piece of detective work," he said. "If you hadn't acted promptly, and with courage, the evidence of this crime would have been lost to us."

I drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid I'm indirectly responsible for another death in the process," I said. "One of your men. His name was Blades."

Captain Dougherty's mouth tightened. "George Blades?"

"I'm certain he was following me when he suffered the accident that killed him," I said. "Of what interest was I to him, Captain Dougherty? He had been watching me for nearly a week that I know of."

"You've been frank with me, Mr. Cantwell. I'll be frank with you," Dougherty said. "Blades' interest in you was incidental. The person he was concerned with was your brother."

"Greg! But why?"

Dougherty looked down at his square stubby fingers. Then he raised his eyes to me. "Inspector Blades specialized in homicides, Mr. Cantwell."

I just stared at him.

"He was a dogged kind of man," Dougherty said. "Once he had a lead to a crime, no matter how trivial, he never gave up till he ran it to earth. It was like a religion with him. Once on the trail he would never give up until he was proved wrong, beyond the shadow of a doubt. A strange, persistent man."

"But Greg!" I said.

"I could get the documents for you another time," Dougherty said. "But I have seen them and I remember them well. It was some months ago, nearly a year if I remember correctly. Your brother was drinking in a local tavern with a friend. He had had a great deal too much to drink and was in a highly emotional state. He was overheard to make statements to his friend. He said, as I remember, 'I am a murderer! I am guilty of murder! I should hang for it, but I haven't the courage to give myself up.'"

"Greg said those words?"

"An informer reported the matter to us," Dougherty said. "Blades undertook to investigate."

"And who had been murdered?" I asked.

"We still don't have the answer to that, sir."

"And you were hounding him because of that drunken statement? It could have been a figure of speech. A soldier—an officer—might easily believe he had somehow endangered the lives of his men."

"Blades never dropped a lead till he had the answer," Dougherty said.

"And this friend? This friend to whom he is supposed to have confessed?"

Dougherty frowned. "A woman, sir. An actress. Sybil Gaul."

The landlady of the boardinghouse opened the door to me at about ten o'clock the next morning. The look she gave me made me conscious for the first time of my appearance. I had spent at least two hours clinging to the outside of a freight car, bathed in soot from the engine smoke; I had tramped through the mud of the battlefield; exhaustion had hollowed my cheeks, and my eyes must have been feverish and frightening to her.

She tried to close the door, but I inserted the toe of my boot in the opening.

"I must see Miss Gaul," I said.

"She's asleep," the woman said.

"You will get her for me at once," I said, "or I shall go from room to room in this house until I find her."

She saw I meant business and she backed away and let me in. I waited in the formal parlor while she went to the upper story of the house.

I should have realized that she would call Patrick Joyce. He came bounding down the stairs a moment later, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt.

"All right, Mr. Cantwell, you're asking for it. Now—" He stopped. I imagine my appearance sobered him.

"I'll be brief, Mr. Joyce," I said. "You and Miss Gaul have lied to me. The man who identified Miss Gaul at the National Hotel was a police officer. His word is unimpeachable. Also, it is a matter of police record that Miss Gaul knew Greg. Now, I want the truth, quickly and without evasion, or I shall charge you with being accomplices in a murder!"

The girl appeared then, dressed hastily in a red-velvet house robe. Caught out so definitely in the lie, neither one of them made any bones about it. Part of the story was simple.

They had gone to a place called Mitchell's the night of Greg's murder to have dinner. Because they were actors it had been early, about five-thirty, and they were the first customers. Mitchell's was, according to them, a chophouse furnished with partitioned booths. They had occupied one of them. It seemed that Joyce had a passion for Maryland oysters, and, being an old customer, he had gone to the kitchen to make his own selection. Meanwhile, two men had occupied the booth behind Miss Gaul.

"I didn't see them come in," Sybil Gaul said. "And when they left I didn't try to see them, because I was frightened."

The conversation she overheard was about Greg and me. Naturally, when she heard Greg's name she listened, because she *had* known Greg. One man had reported to the other that Greg had "not yet returned to his hotel." The second man ordered him to go back to the hotel and keep waiting and watching. The first man then asked, "What about the brother?" He was told that if Greg got to me before they got to Greg, I must be "taken care of," too. The men then left.

When Joyce returned to the table, Miss Gaul told him what she'd heard and suggested warning Greg. Joyce urged her to keep out of it.

"These are dangerous times," Joyce said to me, trying to explain his attitude. "Sybil hadn't seen the men, couldn't identify them."

But Miss Gaul, it seemed, was made of sterner stuff. She now admitted that her part in the play was very small, involving only one scene in the first act. Joyce had the lead in the play and was in it all the way through. So, after thinking about it, she had gone to the National Hotel while the play was in progress.

Unable to find either Greg or me, she had returned to the theater in time for the final curtain call. When I called at the boardinghouse that night she had already told Joyce what she had done, and he had made her promise to deny everything if anyone asked questions.

She was weeping by the time she finished her story. "If I had told you the truth, would it have saved Greg?"

"No," I said. "He was already dead when I came to you. There are two points, Miss Gaul, that you can help with, though. You didn't see the men who talked together in Mitchell's, but would you recognize their voices if you heard them again?"

"I think I would," she said. "Voices, in a way, are my business."

"Good. And now, Miss Gaul, I want to know about your friendship with Greg—when it began, how intimate it was."

She was very frank, Katherine. She had met Greg about a year ago. He'd seen her in a play and arranged a meeting through a mutual friend. She found him gay and charming. She said she'd dined with him twice—the night they met, and a second time about two weeks later. The second time he'd behaved queerly.

"He was very drunk, Mr. Cantwell," she said. "He talked wildly about having killed someone and not having the courage to give himself up. He alternately wept and cursed himself. He was not very pleasant company and I asked him to take me home. He never called on me again and I never saw him again."

"He said nothing more specific about this business of killing someone?"

"No. I didn't take it too seriously. I thought it was some military matter in which he'd been derelict. He was passionately devoted to the Union cause. I thought something he'd done might have caused the unnecessary death of some of his men."

"I would like you to come with me," I said. "I would like you to listen to a man's voice."

That is how it happened, Katherine, that later that morning I arrived at your home with Sybil Gaul and Patrick Joyce. As I write this, I don't know what I would have done if I'd known what the next half hour held in store for me. Perhaps it had to happen. Perhaps the truth can never stay hidden forever.

When I reached your house with Miss Gaul and Joyce, excitement was already high. Paul Muncrief had acted with whirlwind speed. He had found Kennedy and had brought him and his foreman, a man named Watson, to your house. He had brought them there at the point of a gun. I found them in the drawing room, with you and your father, when I came into the room, having left Miss Gaul and Joyce in the entrance hall.

"You were not at your hotel. I thought you might come here," Muncrief said. "I brought these gentlemen to see you."

I could tell from your face and your father's that you already knew the news about Greg. I remember your coming toward me like a sleepwalker and putting your ice-cold hand in mine. Tears had not yet broken through the dam of your control.

Kennedy and his foreman were plainly frightened. Muncrief had been at them already. Kennedy now denied having overheard any conversation between Greg and you.

"Why should I be listening? Why should I be concerned? I'd never seen or heard of your brother before that evening, Mr. Cantwell."

"I never saw him then, or since," Watson, the foreman, said.

It was like a stage play, Katherine, with the actors entering on a prearranged cue. For, no sooner had Kennedy and Watson spoken than Sybil Gaul came in from the entrance hall.

"Those are the men, Mr. Cantwell. Those are the men who were at Mitchell's," she said positively.

"I think that puts the noose around your neck, Kennedy," I said grimly. "I have the proof of murder, and Miss Gaul will swear in court that she heard you plan it."

Words flooded out of Kennedy then; he had tried to hide one crime, but murder was another matter, he said.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said hoarsely. "The whole truth. That night, when you and your brother came here, you went to the study with Mr. Willis. Muncrief suggested we go to the pantry and make ourselves a drink. I caught on. It was obvious your

brother and Miss Willis wanted to be alone. Muncrief went into the kitchen to speak to the servants about something. I made my drink and started back here.

"The rugs are thick and I made no noise. I heard your brother talking to Miss Willis, and I listened. Sure, I listened. He was telling her of a plan to penetrate the Confederate lines and get the true strength of the Confederate Army for McClellan.

"Don't get me wrong! I'm not for one side or the other in this war. I told you that night—I'm for Number One. Your brother seemed to think McClellan had been misinformed. If he had been, he would now attack. I wanted him to wait. I had five thousand cavalry mounts. If he moved without them, he might never take them. If he scored a quick victory, the war might be over.

"It was a matter of a couple of weeks, as far as my needs were concerned. I—well, I determined to waylay your brother when he came back from the front lines and keep him from delivering his information to Headquarters."

"And me?" I said.

"If he got to you first we would have to keep you silent, too."

"Go on, Kennedy."

"I was here the night you came to tell Miss Willis that your brother was missing. That meant to me that he was back. Watson, who'd been at the hotel, had missed him somehow. Oh, I heard the butler tell Miss Willis you were here. I listened to your conversation. I don't deny it. I knew, from what you'd said, you'd be calling on this Miss Gaul. I made excuses here and got Watson. We waited for you outside the boardinghouse."

"It was you two who struck me down?"

"We meant to hold you somewhere until we could deliver the horses," Watson broke in. "That was all, I swear it."

"We were forced to run before we could make you a prisoner," Kennedy said. "And we never did find your brother. I swear it, I swear it on my life!"

I listened to Kennedy, half persuaded, against my will, that he was telling the truth. One by one each of the people who had figured on my list of suspects had somehow slipped away. Blades was dead, and above suspicion. I had to believe the Gaul girl, unless she'd turned against an ally to save herself. Muncrief seemed to be determinedly fighting on my side. It was your father who made me realize that my terrible weariness had blunted my senses.

"Mr. Cantwell would be a fool to accept your story without a great deal more probing, Kennedy," he said. "You've had to admit to planning a crime because of Miss Gaul's testimony. It's laughable to expect us to accept your word you didn't go through with it. You and your man here had full opportunity and a motive.

"You're admittedly outside the law, concerned with no cause. You would have schemed to prevent a victory for McClellan if you could have earned a few miserable dollars by it. I suggest it might be quite easy to prove this man Watson was at the hotel. Someone may actually have seen him leave the hotel with Gregory."

He turned to me. "And there is one thing you should know, Cantwell. Kennedy had done me a favor in the far West, bringing certain information on political affairs there that was important to *The Dispatch*. That's why I gave him the run of my house. And I did something more than that for him: I got him a pass that would take him through to the front lines."

Sweat ran down Kennedy's face in little rivers. "I've told you the truth!" he cried. "It's a coincidence I had a pass. All I wanted was time. I didn't need to kill anyone! I just needed time."

It was at that moment that another actor came upon the stage. Your butler approached me to say that someone was asking for me—a man named Whalen. For a moment I couldn't recall the name, and then I remembered he was the government clerk whose name had been scribbled in Greg's notebook.

He was a mild little man, as far removed from violence as anyone you can imagine. He peered at us all through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. "I'm Richard Cantwell," I told him.

"Oh." He came to me, holding out his hand. In it was Greg's watch. "I'm glad to be rid of this, Mr. Cantwell," he said. "Your brother said you might redeem it. It has bothered me to have this valuable watch in my possession. It is, of course, worth far more than the five dollars your brother promised me."

"How did you come by this watch, Mr. Whalen?"

He was instantly frightened by the tone of my voice, and by the stares of the others. "He approached me, night before last, on the street. We were complete strangers to each other. He asked me if I would deliver a note for him. He said it was a matter of life and death. He said he'd just returned from a business trip and had no money, but he gave me this watch—he *insisted* on it, Mr. Cantwell! He said he would redeem it for five dollars if I would deliver the note."

"And did you?"

"But of course!" Whalen said.

"Whom was the note for?"

"Miss Katherine Willis," Whalen said. "I brought it to this house as I was instructed."

If a bolt of lightning had struck in the center of that room, Katherine, I could not have been more stunned. Your hand slipped out of mine like a dead thing. I looked at your face, and it was white and cold. You had had a note from Greg! You had known he was back. You, the one person on whom I would have staked my life. That, I think, was the most dreadful moment of my life, and one for which you may never forgive me.

Paul Muncrief was a better man than I, Katherine. His voice cracked like a pistol shot in the silent room. "Whalen! Did you deliver that note to Miss Willis in person? That is Miss Willis, standing there before you."

"Oh, no, sir," Whalen said. "I never saw Miss Willis before now."

"To whom did you deliver the note, Whalen? The butler?"

"I—I don't think so, sir. It was him," Whalen said, pointing.

I shall never forget your father's face as he rose slowly from the armchair in which he'd been sitting. It was the face of a damned soul.

"Katherine!" he whispered.

You walked straight toward him, and when you spoke your voice was hard and without sympathy: "Father, you had a note for me from Greg?" He didn't answer. "Where is it? What have you done with it?"

He twisted his frail body from side to side as though it were wracked with pain.

"You killed him, Father!" you said. "You killed him!"

Very slowly he sank back into the chair and covered his face with his slender blue-veined hands. The silence was intolerable. The only audible sound in the room was Kennedy's heavy breathing, as he mopped his face with a scarlet bandanna. Then your father began to talk to you, Katherine, as though no one else was in the room.

"My darling! My darling!" he said.

I thought that was meant for you, but later I was not so sure. Later I thought it must have been a cry for help to the person he had loved most in the world, and who was beyond helping him—

your mother. Then he raised his eyes to you, and what he said then was only for you, an agonized plea for understanding:

"Yes, I took the note from this man when he delivered it, Katherine. I destroyed it. But I can quote it to you, word for word." His voice shook. "'My dearest Katherine,' it read. 'I am back, and my mission has been successful. When I deliver my information to McC. the war will be on in earnest and I will be in the middle of it. Darling, I have tried to understand your father's objection to our immediate marriage. I have tried to bear with it. But the thought of waiting, the thought of never having you for my own, is unendurable. Won't you come at once to Rick's rooms at the National? As a soldier I can procure an immediate marriage license. Your father will forgive you in the end. Please, my darling, put an end to our waiting. Your adoring Greg.'"

Your father quoted the note with a bitter inflection, as though the words burned his lips as he spoke them. He drew a deep breath. "I could not let you go, Katherine, as you will see. I could not!" He seemed to force himself to go on. Then he spoke the terrible words I shall never forget: "Gregory Cantwell murdered your mother!"

We stood there, all of us, motionless as figures in a waxworks. I wanted to cry out a protest, but no sound would come.

Your father's words came faster now. "Since that day a year ago I have ceaselessly tried to discover who was responsible for your mother's death. Paul can tell you that he and other members of our staff on *The Dispatch* were asked to determine what troops were deployed in that area on that day. I still have contacts in the South who were making the same effort for me.

"It was shortly after your mother's death, you may remember, that you met Gregory Cantwell. He came here with another officer of your acquaintance. I know now how that came about. At the time I had no notion of it. In all this time I finally learned of certain detachments of men, scouting squads, that were near the scene of your mother's death. Painstakingly I checked them, one by one. It has taken many months.

"Finally, only a short time ago, I unearthed the fact that a group of Union cavalry had been sent to that very road under special emergency order. A Confederate officer, disguised as a civilian, was said to be driving by carriage along that road, carrying explosives with which to destroy a railroad bridge.

"The Northern cavalry had orders to shoot on sight, because it

was thought if they attempted to take the man prisoner he might discharge his explosives, killing himself and as many Union soldiers as were involved in the arrest. The officer in charge of that cavalry squad was Gregory Cantwell."

I only half heard the next words he spoke. I began to understand the meaning of Greg's drunken outburst to Sybil Gaul, the outburst that had put Blades on his trail.

"And so, Katherine," your father was saying when I could listen again, "I had gradually come to the conclusion that Gregory Cantwell knew the truth about your mother's death. I was still searching for other members of the squad he commanded to get definite evidence. That's why I hadn't confronted him with it before. I didn't want to frighten him away till I had the whole truth.

"But when that note came for you I opened it, shamelessly. Everything about Gregory Cantwell had become important to me. I couldn't let you go to him, Katherine. I went to him myself, knowing I had to face him without all the evidence I needed. I couldn't risk the possibility of your eloping with your mother's murderer!

"I reached the National Hotel only shortly after he'd arrived there himself. I had driven my carriage to the hitching lot in the rear of the hotel. I went in by a back entrance and up to his room. He let me in, himself. He was surprised, I think. He knew I must have read the note. I put the other matter straight to him.

"Katherine, I used the word 'murder' before, and it was murder. But this boy you loved was not without courage. He instantly told me the truth. He had been in charge of a squad, ordered to intercept a dangerous enemy. They had received word that this man was traveling the road by carriage. They knew approximately when he should arrive at a given turn in the road.

"Gregory Cantwell was filled with zeal. He and his men waited in ambush, Cantwell cuddling a rifle in his arms. They had orders to shoot on sight. A signal from a scout on an adjacent hillside warned them of the approach of a carriage. When it rounded the turn, Cantwell sighted along the barrel of his rifle."

"'It's a woman!' one of his men cried."

Your father's breath came hard as he continued, "Cantwell said he thought it might be a clever disguise. He was many yards distant from the carriage. He fired, and Emily was dead!"

Again there was a long silence, dreadful to endure. You had not moved. The stoniness of your face had not changed.

"It was no crime in a legal sense," your father said. "Emily was

traveling without papers. She was in the zone of fighting. It was a regrettable accident. *But he should have made sure, Katherine!*

"His own guilt was enormous. He told me that. He told me it tortured him so that he could not sleep. It so happened that the man who was by his side when he pulled the trigger was killed later in the day. There was no one to tell the story against him. He felt he should give himself up, yet he had committed no crime.

"Finally, he arranged to meet the family of his victim, thinking there might be some restitution he could make without revealing himself. He saw you, Katherine, and he fell in love with you, and he was lost. He could never tell you, or you might despise him. And so he lived with his sense of guilt until I faced him with it."

Your father moistened his lips. "He was honest with me. He was straightforward. But rage and grief and despair welled up in me. I lunged at him, seizing him by the throat. He did not fight me. He was much stronger, of course. He loosened my grip, almost gently. I fell back against the desk, and in trying to steady myself my hand closed over that accursed letter opener.

"I struck at him with all my might. I shall never forget the astonishment in his eyes as he sank slowly to the floor. I shall never forget looking down and seeing only the hilt of the letter opener in my hand.

"He wasn't dead. I was suddenly overcome by what I'd done. I started to go for a doctor. He begged me not to—for your sake, Katherine. He said you must never know. It was he who suggested changing into his uniform. I could get him to a military hospital. No one need know the truth. He was very weak, but he could help a little.

"He managed, by leaning on me, to walk down the back stairs to my carriage. He leaned against me on the front seat as I whipped up my horses and started for the nearest hospital. We had gone less than half a mile when he slumped hard against me. He was dead."

Your father's voice lowered to a whisper. "After that I acted like a coward. I was afraid that you would hate me. I tried to think what to do, driving through the night, his body leaning against me. I wondered where to hide a dead soldier without exciting suspicion. The obvious answer: where there was fighting.

"I drove forty miles through the night. It took me nearly seven hours. Once I was stopped by a patrol, but they knew me. I was Jared Willis, important newspaper publisher. I had papers to pass

me through the lines. I said I had offered the young lieutenant a ride. He was exhausted and asleep. They accepted that.

"It was daylight when I left him on the battlefield, dragging him the last hundred yards from where I'd left my lathered team tied in a clump of shrubbery. The horses I took to a farm and I came back on one of the hospital trains. No one questioned my absence from this house. The servants assumed I was at the paper. The people at the paper assumed I'd gone to the front . . . Katherine!"

He rose to go to you, and you turned away.

"If you will give me a moment to prepare myself, Mr. Cantwell," he said to me, "I will go with you to the police."

I bowed as he walked past us all and into the study. There were details his story didn't answer. We would never know what information Greg brought back with him. And the torn pages from his notebook? I think now Greg must have torn them out himself, committing certain notes he made to memory, not wanting to risk carrying them with him as he made his way back to Washington. Kennedy, Miss Gaul, Muncrief—all had seemed so suspicious, and none had been involved at all.

These were the thoughts that were going through my mind when we heard the sound of the shot in your father's study. We all knew in that instant that he had become his own judge and executioner.

It was I you turned to when you heard the shot, Katherine, not Muncrief. It was in the shelter of my arms that you wept quietly, not his.

Did you turn to me, my dear, because you sensed how deeply I felt for you? Or did you turn to me only because you were shy of Muncrief, because you loved him, and because you knew he loved you? But if that is so, Katherine, why have you not been seeing him? I know that you have not.

Could you make a life with me, always remembering how close I was to Greg and how deeply I loved him? Would the tragedy caused by Greg's unhappy zeal, which cost you both your mother and your father, always stand between us? Muncrief is a fine young man. He would cherish you. But you and I are alone, Katherine, so desperately alone. There is so much we have to give each other. Are the barriers too high? Are the memories too difficult to obliterate? I ask you this, with all my love.

Richard Cantwell

a **NEW** short story by

TIMOTHY CHILDS

It may be stretching our editorial policy to publish Timothy Childs's "A Place to Grow" in EQMM—but we just couldn't resist giving you this story. True, it has no mystery or detection, in the usual sense; it does have six killers and an off-trail crime, in an unusual sense. We felt strongly that someone should publish this story about Walter Thackery, the predictable man, and the one unpredictable moment in his life . . .

A PLACE TO GROW

by **TIMOTHY CHILDS**

Walter Thackery and the old elephant arrived at the waterhole almost at the same moment, just as dusk was closing in on the parched East African plain. For Walter it was the end of the eleventh day of a three-week tour through Kenya and Tanzania—a retirement gift from Marlow, Diggs & Lippincott, accountants. For the old elephant it was the start of a forty-ninth solitary night of danger at the waterhole—seven weeks since the herd had migrated without him.

At first neither saw the approaching lions.

Tsavo Lodge was designed to blend with its surroundings. Each block of rooms stood on concrete stilts, allowing the wild animals to move about freely. The public areas—lobby, dining room, and patio bar—looked out on the man-made waterhole, which was kept full, even in the dry season, by a deep well. Spotlights provided illumination for night-viewing.

Painfully the old elephant limped to his place at water's edge. Through the layer of red dust on his back he could sense the spotlights growing stronger with the deepening of night, an oval of artificial moonbeams that isolated the nearly blind elephant from his audience on the raised patio 40 yards away. The light made the old elephant feel secure.

But behind him were the lions, submerged in a thick weaving of

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brush that bordered the waterhole on two sides. One lion—the scout—was stalking ahead. No one on the patio could see her, or the other lions, who had strayed a hundred yards behind. Despite their hunger, they would make a patient job of it.

Freshly showered, his back aching from the day's long ride, Walter Thackery hesitated at the entrance to the viewing patio. Half a hundred guests were already there, drinking, talking in low tones, occasionally glancing at the old elephant. At a large table near the railing sat six women, Walter's touring companions. A seventh chair was vacant, obviously meant for him. He looked wishfully at a row of empty stools at the bar, and actually took a step toward them, but the movement lacked conviction.

Sucking in a deep breath and cursing himself for a coward, Walter began to tiptoe toward the women's table, his eyes glued on the seventh chair. Feeling awkward and conspicuous, he bent his crane-like neck low, overly careful not to obstruct the view. No one paid any attention to him. Gratefully he slipped into the empty chair and hunched down. The women barely acknowledged his arrival, their faces reflecting a large measure of indifference.

A waiter appeared. Walter ordered a bottle of Tusker beer, proud that he could make the request entirely in Swahili, with words memorized from his phrasebook. Young Diggs would have lost his superior smile over that.

"Isn't he interesting, Mr. Thackery?"

Walter started at the sound, but it was only Mrs. Butternut. She sat to his right, fidgeting behind a glass of mineral water, wearing another of her print dresses. Her pumpkin-seed face was pointed toward the old elephant.

Walter tried to sound hearty. "Very interesting, Mrs. Butternut. He's a big one, isn't he." He noticed she still wouldn't look directly at him, and felt that her shyness underlined his own.

All day they rode in a Volkswagen Microbus, six aging women and one aging man, chauffeured by a Kikuyu driver. When Walter sat jammed in the uncomfortable middle seat—which was most of the time—he seemed almost invisible despite his gawky height; a silent, unimportant figure. And yet it was he who loved the things they saw. While the others grumbled about the dust, the rough roads, the heat, or the driver's accented English, Walter sat absorbed by the raw purity of Africa. In a way far beyond his power to understand or explain he felt himself a part of the land, and was stronger because of it.

Across from Mrs. Butternut, half reclining, sat the corpulent Agnes Patch. She puffed hard on her cigarette and spoke, her voice a gasping bark. "Well, have you tried your bed yet, Walter? Too soft at this lodge, too."

Walter replied in an exaggerated whisper. "Mine seemed fine. We really should stay quiet or we'll frighten him." He gestured at the elephant and swung his eyes firmly to the waterhole.

The old elephant was sucking water into his trunk and spraying it over his back, where the skin had cracked under the ruthless equatorial sun. For the first 55 years of his life he had rolled in mud to give his back a protective coating. Then, two months before, he'd been unable to rise after the daily mudbath. For hours he struggled, helpless on his side, watched—but unaided—by the rest of his herd. Terrified. Part of the waterhole's bank had finally broken away, leaving a depression that allowed him to stand. Since then he'd been afraid to leave his feet.

At the other end of the waterhole a family of baboons was romping under a scrub acacia tree. One wandered away from the group, toward the tangle of brush that hid the lions. No other animals were in sight. Three nights before, Walter had stayed up until dawn watching at the lighted waterhole of another lodge. Everyone else was asleep, even the clerk who slumbered on the floor behind the front desk, but Walter found sleep driven away by the excitement of Africa. For Walter excitement was a new experience.

Walter Thackery, 65, a predictable man. Thirty-eight years with the largest accounting firm in Milwaukee, diligently applying himself to the duties of—progressively—junior bookkeeper, bookkeeper, assistant to the supervisor of bookkeepers. A competent, impotent man; greatly ignored. Walter Thackery, drone. His wife had left him after 23 years, citing irreconcilable boredom; his three children moved away and didn't write. Walter Thackery, 65, predictable man, drone, uncomplaining conformist. How he hated that.

On the day after his sixty-fifth birthday he had been summoned into the presence of Young Diggs.

"Well, Thackery, old man, I just want to say how much you've meant to us here at the firm." Young Diggs wrinkled his eyes, trying to convey sincerity. "At times like this I wish we hadn't put in that mandatory retirement rule."

But it hadn't been applied to Clinton, or Leahy, or Brewster, or to so many others, Walter had thought. Or to your father, Young Diggs.

"But we want to send you on a retirement trip, to anywhere in the world. Where will it be, old man? Florida? Arizona?"

"Africa."

Which brought a look of confusion and amazement to the smug features of Young Diggs's pudgy face. For the first time in his life Walter Thackery had impulsively done something intended to shock. An enjoyable moment. Besides, he had thought, now I'll get to see something new before I die.

And touring East Africa made him feel more alive than ever before. The red soil and sparse vegetation seemed clean to Walter, stark and clean, a place to grow. Sitting there on the viewing patio, Walter smiled at the thought of growing at his age. Still, there were the visions—of stately giraffes gliding over the flat land in spine-tingling undulations, of a threatening rhino outlined against foothills smoldering from fires set by Masai herdsman, of the countless absurd wildebeests, of the Masai themselves.

The Masai symbolized Africa to Walter, the grinning, free, blood-and-curdled-milk drinking Masai, clutching their spears, long lines of cattle trailing behind them down the steep slopes of Ngorongoro Crater—Masai warriors who cared nothing about Marlow, Diggs & Lippincott, or other assorted failures.

At the waterhole the old elephant still stood slackly, eyes half closed, massive face weary as death. Only a stub of the broken right tusk could be seen; the left tusk was intact, but short, rounded, useless in a fight.

The stalking lioness was invisible in the half light, her trail of movement imperceptible in the covering brush. She paused less than 30 yards away. All the crouching lions were downwind of the elephant. "He looks as if he might be old," Walter whispered in English as the waiter set a big bottle of Tusker beer in front of him.

"Yes, sir, he is an outcast. An old bull. See the torn ear? He comes here every night and stays until dawn."

Walter handed a ten-shilling note to the waiter. He remembered the 17 elephants he'd seen on his all-night vigil at the other lodge. "Do you think others will come tonight?"

The waiter was honest. "I think there will not be others. Most of the animals migrate at this time of year. It is the dry season here."

"You can say that again!" Agnes Patch heaved her bulk into a more upright position and continued to destroy the stillness with her rasping voice. "Dry and hot, and so dirty I can't ever get my ears clean."

Mrs. Butternut took a sip of mineral water. "That elephant certainly looks hungry."

The waiter nodded. "I am sure he is. There is little food around here now, and his instincts are gone. I doubt that he will live—"

A shriek. The straying baboon at the edge of the brush had discovered the stalking lioness. He sprinted back toward the other monkeys, which were already in full flight, the alarm taken up. In his panic the first baboon ran directly through the old elephant's legs, but the elephant noticed nothing.

The waiter's experienced eyes searched the brush. His whisper was urgent. "Look, there! It is a lion!"

People at nearby tables repeated the word in thrilled echoes—lion!—the circle of sound spreading outward like ripples from a stone dropped into a pond.

"Agnes! Millie! I can see him!" Mrs. Butternut was half out of her chair, finger thrust forward for the others to follow.

"Where are you pointing, for God's sake?" Agnes Patch demanded.

Walter fought through the brush with his eyes, spectacles tilted to increase their magnification. Finally he spotted the lioness. A quick movement farther to the right—a second lion, a third, their heads silhouetted against the gray-black sky.

At the waterhole the old elephant saw and heard nothing. He remained motionless, leaden trunk drooping, without the strength or will to resist.

Easy prey.

"Oh, look, more lions!"

Agnes Patch snorted. "Yes, yes, Millie, of course there are more. They're stalking that elephant. One lion couldn't kill it alone."

Walter grabbed the waiter's arm. "They aren't really after the elephant, are they? Lions don't attack elephants, do they?"

From over his right shoulder came a British voice. "Usually not, but lions will attack anything if sufficiently hungry. It's the dry season for them, too." The Lodge manager smiled boyishly under his curving mustache, pleased with the excitement on the patio. A good show sent the guests away happy. Walter looked at him without speaking, his stomach suddenly sick.

"Do you see them, Mr. Thackery?" asked Mrs. Butternut.

He ignored her. Now the lions were moving up openly, four, five, six lions in all. Walter pressed his icy hands against the table to conceal their shaking. Five days before, the tour had come upon a dead elephant, a younger one, killed by poachers for his ivory tusks.

Vultures covered the corpse, ripping holes to get at the soft intestines, leaving behind a void encased in bones and rotting skin.

Walter turned back to the young manager, his stomach now lurching. "Isn't there something you can do? We can't just sit here and do nothing!"

The manager smiled again, a patronizing smile. "Mustn't interfere, old man. Lions have to eat, too, you know."

Further attempts to protest were silenced by a wave of shushing noises aimed at Walter. All around him he could feel the expectation, the tension building as each lion came fully into the circle of spotlights. Agnes Patch strained forward to get a better look. The manager motioned for silence. It was nearly time.

Now the sky was dark, the African plain reduced to a lighted waterhole, an elephant left by his herd to die, and six lions with protruding ribs.

The killers crept closer.

Walter's eyes darted furtively around. Everyone was hypnotized by the drama below. The manager stood by the bar, staring.

The stalking lioness stopped at the edge of the clearing, in position. Behind her the other five lions formed a semicircle. Mrs. Butternut leaned forward, hands near her eyes, ready to cover up if the sight became too bloody. The stalking lioness tensed her muscles to spring.

Walter Thackery's beer glass burst on the concrete floor in a spell-shattering explosion.

Startled by the sudden noise, all six lions dived back into the brush and pressed themselves into the ground, their bodies frozen with alertness. The old elephant never moved.

On the patio Walter felt the stunned silence break into a menacing rumble. He sat paralyzed by the enormity of his act.

"Walter, you idiot, can't you be careful!" Agnes Patch glared at him with undiluted wrath.

The manager was back at Walter's side. "Do sit very still, won't you, old man?" he said in a voice full of rebuke. "You'll spoil the show."

Walter felt a glimmer of satisfaction as he realized the manager no longer sounded condescending. But then he cringed, sensing the accusing eyes beating down on him from all directions. "Sorry," he mumbled. "My elbow must have hit it."

Before returning to the rear of the patio, the young manager sternly pressed a forefinger to his sealed lips.

The lions were moving forward again. Walter's head throbbed. Unwilling to watch the kill, but afraid to walk out through all those disapproving people, he lowered his eyes to the table. He took the still-full bottle of beer in his hand and felt the beads of condensation mingle with sweat from his palm. On the label was the head of a magnificent bull elephant with elegant curving tusks, the sort of elephant that could fight off 600 lions. Not at all like the old elephant at the waterhole.

Slowly Walter's eyes lifted. The lions were at the edge of the clearing. Walter felt isolated, as if time had been suspended. The labored gasps of Agnes Patch were hollow in his ears. She nervously thumped her fingers on the table, louder and louder, like jungle drums, as the lions poised to spring, louder and louder as the stalking lioness started her charge, louder and—

"Not this time!"

Walter's voice trumpeted across the darkness, carrying himself with it, carrying himself at last out of the audience and into the arena. He leaped up violently, sending his chair slamming to the floor. High above his head he raised the full bottle of beer, and then he hurled it down, dashing it into the concrete.

The lions were racing off, frightened and confused. The old elephant never moved. People on the patio were standing, shouting insults at Walter. Mrs. Butternut looked relieved. The manager was running forward, his face twisted in rage.

"Go to hell," Walter Thackery said quietly to no one in particular. Then he walked away, a little smile on his lips.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

What happens when a subdivision of a genre stops progressing, stands still? Perhaps something like this adventure of Flogg O'Flanahan, Private Eye? Perhaps something nightmarish, Dali-esque? Perhaps—but walk down this mean street yourself . . .

DOWN THIS MEAN STREET

by **ROBERT TWOHY**

I got up and heard Carmack's voice. "We're starting a big one this morning!"

He's always chipper at the start of a new book. I've heard it before, nearly the same words: "This is the niftiest plot I ever cooked up! It'll win an Edgar! M-G-M'll buy it! It's got all the moves!"

Sure. So did all the others—all the 14 others that we've worked on the past ten years. All of them died a quick death—from public boredom.

I haven't got much older in the ten years—but I've sure got more tired. And I've been punched and shot and stabbed and blown up and betrayed, and I'm no richer now than I was in the first book, and I still work out of the same sleazy office in San Francisco—which is the city where Carmack and I live—and I'm sick of that office and sick of the dumb characters I have to associate with and the hard work I put in, and I know even before I start a new adventure that it's going to turn into a ridiculous mess that even Steve McQueen couldn't make convincing.

Carmack's junk gets published, but he hasn't had a hit yet; he earns about what a good cab driver earns. All he's got from his literary career are a damaged liver and congested lungs, from drinking and smoking too much at his work desk. All I've got are lumps

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from the beatings and scars from the bullets. It's been a great life.

I heard his voice: "Get down to the office."

"Wait till I get my shoes on."

"Hurry up." I knew he was crouched over his typewriter, cigarette hanging from his lips, another burning in the ashtray, a third making a new burn on the edge of the desk. This guy is a smoker. If they paid you for smoking, he'd have no money problems.

He tapped a few irritated sentences on the typewriter. I got off the bed and limped over to the coat-rack and got my checked sports jacket. It's a sports jacket the likes of which nobody wears any more. He gave it to me in the first book, described it in detail, and I've been wearing it ever since. It's frayed at the sleeves and patched here and there where bullets and knives have punctured it. I did the patching myself. I clean it between adventures, clean it with alcohol—there's always alcohol handy. Alcohol seeps through the walls of my cubicle—all I have to do is rub a rag along the wall and the rag is soaked. That's how I clean my clothes—if I didn't clean them I'd be ashamed to walk down the mean streets he's always making me walk down. He likes that phrase, "mean streets"—he lifted it from the same guy he lifts a lot of his plots from.

I put on the jacket and he bellowed again, "Hurry up!"

I growled something and he heard me growl. "What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

"Don't talk smart. Save the wisecracks for the story."

I said, "I need a new jacket."

"What's the matter with the one you got?"

"Apart from the fact it's falling apart, it's out of date. The style is Goodwill vintage '60's."

"Don't bother me with details. The play's the thing. Get on down to your office—somebody just came in."

"I know."

"What do you mean, you know?"

"All the books start with somebody just coming into my office."

"That's my classic introduction. I know what I'm doing."

"Why don't you start this one in a nice restaurant—with me sitting down to a big breakfast?"

I was hungry. I hadn't eaten in a long time—he hadn't given me a bite in the last three books. It would give me a big lift to sit down to a classy breakfast—toasty English muffins with butter melting all over them, baked ham with slices of pineapple, eggs scrambled just right . . . once I'd had a breakfast like that. That was in about

the sixth book. I'd got up from it feeling great, and the rest of the story had gone beautifully—I'd never been sharper with the wise-cracks, never taken my beatings with more style, never shot so straight. I reminded him of that.

He said, "Yeah, that was a great breakfast I wrote—but this adventure has to start in your office. I got a reason for that . . . there's a girl waiting there now, and she's getting a little impatient."

I had a funny feeling when he said that. There was something lying on the edge of what he was saying. I didn't know what it was. I can read his mind some of the time, but not all the time. He was thinking something that he'd just as soon I didn't know about yet. I had that feeling.

I got my .38 from under the pillow, put it in my jacket, and limped on out of my cubicle. He didn't notice I was limping, hadn't caught on that I'd limped through the last two books, ever since the twelfth book, *The Big Messaround*, which was as stupid as any of the others, most of it written when he was totally drunk. The stupidest part was when he had me jump out the window of the sanitarium to get away from Dr. Mytroba's albino hit man. I was supposed to jump far out and land on top of a chicken-delivery truck parked down there. I jumped, and it was a good far jump, but the truck wasn't there—the damn fool forgot that he'd had Dr. Mytroba blow it up six pages previous, the doctor being phobic about chickens among other things. So I landed hard on the pavement and my right leg twisted under me.

Later, in a brief period when he was more or less sober, he caught the error and wrote out the truck blowup; but the damage was already done, and my leg's been a little crooked ever since. Being a shlunk he hadn't noticed—and if I was lucky, he'd keep on not noticing.

Because Carmack likes me the way the guy who has the dog act likes the dog that goes through the tricks. If the dog gets old or gets a crooked leg, the guy won't like him so much. And if Carmack gets the idea that I can't handle the goofball routines he hatches up for me, he's going to stop using me. He's going to stop thinking of me. And when he stops thinking of me, then that's the end of me. Because then I'm gone—I turn into nothing.

You see, I live in his mind, and his mind is a muddle and a mess, and reeks of alcohol, and you wouldn't want your worst enemy to live in a dump like his mind, but there's no other place for me. And though my life stinks, being nothing would be worse. I don't know

that it *would* be—but for the present I'd just as soon put off knowing. For the present I'll go on trying to hide as well as I can the fact that I've got a crooked leg.

I limped on down the damp gloomy corridor. Some slimy things were moving around there. Slimy things were always finding their way into the corridor. I kicked some of them out of the way, and moved on. I asked, "What's the plot line here?"

"You don't have to know. There's a girl waiting in your office. Take it from there."

"Okay." I couldn't argue about it. His idea is that one thing leads to another—don't lay things out with charts and diagrams. He feels that planning a story takes the life out of it. That wouldn't hurt his stories—they have no life to begin with, except for me. I'm the only character with a breath of reality that he ever created. The characters I work with are people lifted from other, better stories—cut-rate copies made of cardboard. Me, I'm a projection of his daydreams about himself, I'm what he'd like to be if had any moxie or character. I do the things he wishes he had the guts to do—he endowed me with some of his own hopes, thoughts, feelings. That's why I'm different from the others—why I have a certain reality.

I kept limping along and gradually the walls of that dank corridor faded out and light came in and it was daylight, a nice day, and I was walking down one of the mean streets, 7th Street actually—ahead was the big blue-and-white Greyhound depot. And the usual bunch of people were passing in and out—taxis were parked along the curb, a few drunks and crazies stumbled around in the general crowd. There were street noises, everything seemed authentic, and it *was* authentic. He knows the San Francisco street scene. He fakes and hokes most things, but he can make a picture of the things he knows. Faintly below the street sounds I could hear the steady tap-tap of his typewriter, and knew as I walked toward my office, concentrating on not limping now because he had his eye on me, that this opening shot would be the best part of the book. From here on things would start to go downhill.

I went two blocks and here was where I work, a seedy and despondent-looking building just off Mission Street. My office is on the third floor. There isn't any elevator. I climbed the stairs, wishing I had that big breakfast under my belt, wondering who the girl was in my office. She was in trouble, I knew—the adventures always start with a girl in trouble.

I heard suddenly another sound in the background—the type-

writer stopped clacking and there was a splashing sound. I knew that sound: Carmack had got his bottle and glass and started lubricating his brain gears and finger muscles for the task ahead. From now on there'd be a lot of that splashing.

I unlocked my office door, which had lettering on the frosted glass—*FLOGG O'FLANAHAN, PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS*—and went in. A girl was sitting in the client's chair. She turned and looked at me.

She was about 22. She wore a fuzzy pink sweater that really had shape, and a neat brown skirt. She had dark hair, a pretty mouth, and eyes of deep green that had an intent, anxious look.

She sat stiffly and looked at me with those anxious eyes and said in a soft voice, "Mr. O'Flanahan?"

I said that I was.

She fumbled in her handbag that lay on the desk, took a cigarette from it, put it in her lips, and fired it with a Bic lighter.

Everyone smokes a lot in Carmack's novels—you'd think he had a contract with the Tobacco Institute. But it's because by having the people light up, he can make significant breaks in the dialogue. A character flames up, then pulls a gun and shoots somebody; a girl lights up, says "Goodbye," and jumps out of a window. These significant pauses are Carmack's idea of high drama. He uses them at least a dozen times in every book.

I waited for the girl to say something significant after lighting up, but all she said was "Good morning." And I had the feeling she wasn't saying what Carmack had thought she would say. She was stalling, for some reason. She looked at me with those troubled eyes.

It puzzled me. It wasn't just the usual painted-on look; it had depth.

Which was ridiculous. The depth of her eyes was a trick of the morning sunlight through the Venetian blinds—an illusion. Only cardboard people with painted eyes come into my office.

I heard Carmack's irritated voice: "Are you just going to look at her? Say something!" I heard the splash from his bottle again.

I sat down at the desk and said to the girl, "How did you get in here?"

"No!" Carmack yelled. "Forget that! Get on with the dialogue!"

"The door was locked. How'd she get in?"

"That's a detail! I'll clean it up later! Get this thing moving!"

He was right. Being a shlunk, he let people walk through locked doors without giving it a thought. Later he would catch most of the

errors, or some of them, and straighten them out, or not. I shouldn't have bothered to mention the locked door. It was because of that look in her eyes, that look of reality—it confused me, took my mind off the job.

I concentrated on myself as Flogg O'Flanahan, Private Eye, and said, "What's your name?"

"Gail Gill."

"That's a nice name."

"I don't feel so nice this morning."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Last night."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't think I want to."

"Then don't. Tell me instead why you have a look of reality in your eyes."

Carmack banged the typewriter savagely. I knew he was belting out a string of X's. He roared, "That stinks! That goes nowhere! Get on with it, O'Flanahan! Get your mind on this!"

He was right again. What I had said about that look in her eyes had nothing to do with his sap-headed story. I said it because it was what I was really wondering—how could one of Carmack's people have eyes that showed feeling?

I got back on the track, and said to her, "Is it that bad?"

"It's . . . that bad."

I knew what her shiver meant. She might have some inner reality, but that shiver was straight Carmack, 100 proof. It was the signal for me to bring out the bottle.

I reached in the desk. "Can you use a drink?"

She nodded. As far as Carmack is concerned, everybody at any time can use a drink.

I got paper cups and poured drinks. As I was pouring I heard a splash from Carmack's bottle—he was going to have a drink too.

I sipped, and she sipped, and we looked at each other, and my eyes said, "Is something going on that I don't know?" and her eyes said, "Yes." And my eyes asked, "What?" and hers said, "I'm worried and confused."

And Carmack yelled, "What's going on here! Why are you both just googling at each other? Somebody make a noise, somebody do something!"

I said to the girl, with my mouth, "What happened last night?"

"I . . . need help. Everything's a mess."

"Tell me about it."

"It's about . . . my brother, Jason. I knew that little tramp would be trouble for him. He's a fool, he's always been a fool. A dear fool. I knew she'd ruin him, I didn't know how or why, but . . ."

In the background was the steady tap-tap of the typewriter. Not quite so steady—he was well into his third drink. There were pauses, occasional stutters in the typing. "Go on," I said to Gail Gill. I thought, she's saying what she should say—but under her words there was trouble and doubt, and somehow I knew it had nothing to do with her brother Jason.

She said, as Carmack tapped away, more and more fumble-fingered on the keys, "I went to her apartment. I went up the stairs. I was going to pay her to go away, to leave Jason alone. I knew she'd accept the money. She was just a cheap little tramp."

"Was?"

"Yes." She shivered—and I filled her cup again, and my own. "I knocked, got no answer. I tried the door. It opened. I went in. The bedroom door was open. I saw her lying there on the bed. She was dead. A knife handle stuck out of her neck."

She lit a cigarette, puffed hard, and gazed at me, and her eyes were full of uncertainty about what was going to happen next. What was going to happen next?

She said, "The knife handle had P.G. scratched on it."

"P.G.?"

"Yes. My brother Phineas' initials. It was Phineas' hunting knife, stuck there in her neck."

"I thought you said Jason."

She put her hand to her head. "Jason? Jason who?"

"Your brother."

"Who? Oh. Yes. Of course. Jason. And he shot her with his hunting knife."

She was all up in the air now. She had tried to hold down whatever was disturbing her, but it had taken over. I knew for sure now she wasn't cardboard—the cardboard girls never blew up, unless it was in the story for them to blow up. This girl was really troubled. She sat there at the desk, her hands twisting in her lap, staring at them, chewing her pretty lower lip. I said, "Take it easy. You want another drink?"

She shook her head, still chewing her lip. Carmack's voice came,

mushy from what he'd drunk, but trying to be sort of soothing: "S'all right. I can fake out the rest of that story about Jason. It's just padding anyway—just so your next move will be dramatic contrast . . . You did good. Now stand up, and reach into your handbag."

She nodded, got up stiffly, and reached into her handbag on the desk. I sat watching her. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

"Take it out," said Carmack. The typewriter was tap-tapping slowly.

She pulled out a gun.

"Shoot him," said Carmack.

I jumped in my chair—and got both feet hooked in the rung. I struggled, but couldn't get clear of the chair—me and the chair went crashing over sideways.

On the way down I'd grabbed the .38 from my jacket, and as I landed on my elbow, the gun flew from my hand, bounced to the floor, and skidded away to the far wall.

"Smooth move, O'Flanahan!" yelled Carmack. "Shows what you've come to!"

I lay there on the floor on my side, my feet still hooked in the rung, staring up at the girl. And she looked down at me and the look of trouble was fading from her green eyes, and coming into them was a look of relief—as if she'd worked out a problem, and now everything was clear.

Carmack shouted at her, "You got him now, he's a plucked duck! Drill him!"

I looked at her and she smiled, laid the gun on the desk, and said in a soft voice, "No."

"No? Whadaya mean, no?" He really sounded wild. The girl sat down in her chair. I reached down and began to unhook my feet from the rung.

Carmack bellowed, "Listen, sister, don't fool around with him! He's got a crooked leg and his reflexes are gone, but he's still Flogg O'Flanahan, and he's got out of worse jams than this! So pick up the gun and nail him while he's klutzing around down there!"

So all the time he had known I had a crooked leg.

"Sure, I knew it." He had read my thoughts. "You've been falling apart for books. You were good once, but you're all washed up now. Nobody wants to read about you any more—your time is past."

Finally I was clear of the chair. I started to get up.

He said, "This is the world of computers, high finance, super-

missiles, petro-conspiracies. I've finally faced it—the time for walking down mean streets is over. I need a detective in tune with the new beat, someone who'd be at home in a snazzy disco joint, someone without a gimpy leg. Some of you is me, and I've got to move on from the part of me that's you."

He had lowered his voice, it had taken on the solemn tone that a drunk gets when every word is a pearl of profundity. "Don't look on this as an end—it's a beginning. The beginning of a new career, a bright new detective rising from your ashes. So we all advance. Except you, of course."

I had stood up, and I looked at the girl, who sat there, not stiff now, but easy in her chair; and she looked back at me with those deep and glowing eyes, and smiled.

I said to Carmack, "So you set me up. Who're you going to replace me with?"

"Her."

"A girl? *This* girl?"

"Right. Because this is the age of Liberation—a woman can do all the things you can do. Under those soft curves she's a steel whip—and she's a lot smarter than you. And she doesn't limp . . . She's going to be great. We've talked it over—isn't that so, Magda?"

"Magda? I thought you were Gail Gill."

She said, "No. But I'm not Magda either."

Carmack shouted, "You are too! That's the name I gave you—so that's your name. You're Magda Crajovescu of the C.I.A.—an agent of Rumanian descent."

I asked, "Why Rumanian?"

"I have a hunch that Rumanian will be the thing next year. It's the Olympic year, and that little Comenici girl will be all over the tube."

He could be right. But his plot line seemed woolier than ever. I said, "Why would a C.I.A. girl of Rumanian ancestry come to a sleazy office and knock off a private detective who doesn't have any high-class international connections?"

There was another splash from his bottle, and a chuckle from him. "Because you're not really Flogg O'Flanahan, private eye. He was disposed of a long time ago—you took over his identity as a cover. You're really Snoutchev."

"Who?"

"Snoutchev. Dmitri Snoutchev of the Leningrad Snoutchevs. Oh, you fooled a lot of people, but finally the C.I.A. got onto you. Too

many things about you seemed fishy. Why were pretty girls always hanging around your office? How come you walked down so many mean streets? They caught on to you at last—you weren't the seedy nobody you pretended to be. You've been a leader of the spy apparatus in the U.S. for a long, long time."

"I have?"

"You have if I say you have."

"I don't even speak Russian."

"You do if I say you do. And your dying words, as Magda plugs you, will be—Viva Lenin! Can you remember that?"

"That's Spanish."

"So, you had a Spanish grandmother. There are Spanish Communists too. Quit dissembling, Snoutchev, drop the mask. I see through you and so does she. Pick up the gun, Magda."

I looked at the gun. I looked at her. She looked back at me, and smiled. She didn't move for the gun. So I didn't either.

He didn't notice—I heard him pouring another drink. "She's not zapping you just to be mean. It's very important to the C.I.A. plot, and to the plot of the story, that your death seem just a sordid, senseless killing. The security of the nation depends on the artful staging of this murder—which isn't a murder at all, but an authorized and ethical elimination."

His voice was really mushy now, with the booze he'd drunk. "That's right," he said to the girl, "smile at him, look sweet, milk the scene a little—that's good. I like that." There were a few bangs on the typewriter—not much, he was hitting three and four keys at a time, and gave up in a few seconds. "I'll hold it in my mind till later—hey, wait a minute!" His voice was suddenly excited. "Hold it, I'm getting a flash—don't pick up the gun! Leave the gun there—forget the gun! I'm getting a really dynamite gimmick . . . You've been trained at the C.I.A.'s Advanced Institute of the Martial Arts in judo, karate, kung fu—and *bayama gizma*!"

I said, "What's bayama gizma?"

"That's the most secret martial art of all. A Past Master, or in this case Past Mistress, of bayama gizma develops such concentrated power in her gaze that all she has to do is look at a victim, just look at him, and he starts smashing himself with his fists and kicking himself in the groin and jabbing his eyes out. Hey, that opens up terrific complications that the police can fiddle around with, when you're found *self-destructed*! How about it, Magda?"

She said in her soft voice, "I don't know bayama gizma."

"Sure you do! You've been thoroughly schooled in it. I say you have, so you have—so start using it on him!"

She looked at me. I waited for something to come over me so I'd start punching myself, kicking myself in the groin, but nothing did. She just looked at me and smiled.

I had to say it. "You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen."

Carmack yelled, "Turn on the bayama gizma!"

She murmured, "No."

"You have to, because I created you! So you have to do what I say!"

"You didn't create me. You stole me from someone else's story."

"So what? I ran you through the selector of my mind, gave you different clothes, a different hairdo, different ethnics—I do that with all my characters. I give them something to make them distinctive—a tattoo, a nifty wiggle—"

"I don't have a tattoo or a nifty wiggle."

"Maybe I'll give you a tattoo." He chuckled again—a mean sound. He was a mean drunk. "I can give you a hundred tattoos. I can give you a nose as long as a cucumber. I can give you elephant ears. I can make your feet flat. I can do anything with you I want! Because I'm a writer—and you're just a character!"

She stood up, and said, "No. I'm a memory—the memory of a girl who died, and the man who had loved her wrote a story about her. And I live on as a memory in his mind. I live there now—even though I'm here."

I didn't understand all of what she said. In fact, I didn't understand any of what she said. But that didn't matter. She had life, she had feelings—that was all that mattered. That, and the fact that her eyes were beautiful.

Carmack growled, "I offer you a chance to be somebody, a big star. If M-G-M buys this, you could play opposite someone like Bronson, Coburn, maybe Travolta. You could have posters, you could be bigger than Wonder Woman—"

"That's what I thought I wanted—to have exciting adventures, go to glamorous places, meet fascinating men. I thought I was tired of being just a memory. And you read the story about me and decided you could use me—"

"I liked your style, your spirit, your inner qualities—and you've got a really great build. I saw the possibilities. That's the artist in me." The booze caught him in the stomach, and he belched.

She said, "Your mind is a dismal place. It's full of dead things and

dying things, and slimy things that run in and out the corridor. And there's a room full of cardboard figures."

I said, "That's what he uses in the stories. There's the mobster, the crooked lawyer, the junkie, the evil doctor, the prostitute with heart of gold—he trots them out and paints new faces on them whenever he needs them."

"Bah," said Carmack. I heard another splash. "I can get anyone to play Magda Crajovescu. I can leaf through any collection of stories and find a girl with more talent and as good a build. You had your chance, and lost it—go. Leave my mind."

He said to me, "You're through too, O'Flanahan."

"I thought I was Snoutchev."

"Whoever you are doesn't matter—because you won't be anybody much longer. You're washed up and living in the past, and you got a crooked leg and your jacket's a mess. I've got no further use for you. I move on, unencumbered, to even greater literary triumphs. M-G-M can't wait for this one. I'll be on Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas." I heard a thump, then a groan, then a louder thump, then a whooshing sigh as he fell forward, smashed his head on the typewriter, rolled out of his chair to the floor, lay there, and started snoring.

The girl got up. I asked, "What's your name? Your real name?"

"Susan."

"That's a good name."

"So is Magda. But it's not *my* name."

She gazed at me and said, "He told me you were only cardboard, and that if I shot you—but I couldn't shoot you. I looked in your eyes and knew you weren't cardboard."

"That's what I knew when I looked in yours."

"I don't want to live in his mind. I'll go back to being just a memory, back to the life I left. There is beauty and harmony there, and pretty streams and sunlight and shade and good places to walk, to lie and dream."

"It sounds nice. Does the guy feed you?"

She smiled. "He remembers wonderful meals we had—before I became a memory."

I listened to Carmack snoring. I said, "He can't forget me till he wakes up and his brain starts functioning again, after its fashion. Then he'll put it to work to forget me. And soon enough he will—and I'll be nothing."

"That's all right." She smiled.

"Is it?"

"Yes. Because you'll come back."

"Will I?"

"Yes. Because after I leave here, I'll remember you. So you'll be a memory too—*my* memory. And then you'll come and we'll walk in a cool place, with dancing water, with sunlight and shade."

It sounded nice—a lot different from mean streets.

I said, "I've got this crooked leg."

"When you come to me you won't have a crooked leg."

"I've got lumps and stuff from being shot and beat up. And this jacket is awful."

"I won't remember the jacket. So you won't have the jacket. But I'll remember the lumps. Because I like the lumps."

"You do? And I'll have a decent jacket?"

"A fine jacket—and you'll come riding to me on a fine brown horse."

"I never rode a horse."

"You'll come riding like a Master of the Hunt. And there will be the sound of trumpets."

"Really? What tune?"

"A lovely tune, a stirring, gallant tune. And we'll have a feast, a marvelous feast."

"That sounds great." I was hungry, all right. "How long from now till this happens?"

"It doesn't matter." And it didn't. When you're nothing, time doesn't matter. And in a little while, when Carmack woke up, I'd start being nothing.

She picked her handbag off the desk and went to the door. She turned and smiled, and then she went out.

I sat there at the desk a while. Then I got up. Her gun still lay on the desk. I left it there. I looked at my own .38, lying against the far wall. I wouldn't be needing it any more.

Then I walked over and picked it up. Because you never know when a gun might come in handy—wherever you go.

I put it in my jacket and went out, locking the door behind me, and limped down the stairs. Halfway down I heard a pistol shot. Somebody was shooting at me. The shot was high. I ducked. Then a bomb went off, making me jump back as half of the stairway in front of me blew up. I ran back up the stairs and to the emergency stairs, and ran down, while somebody ran after me, firing more shots. It was Dr. Mytroba's albino hit man.

I pulled my gun and fired back, and blew his head off. But somebody else started shooting. I got to the ground floor and headed down the hall, limping fast, toward the front door, and a lion was coming in, eyes wild, mouth like a dirty red cave. I fired at him—that made him laugh. He leaped at me and I twisted away just in time, and he sailed on by.

I ran out the door and kept running, because a pack of wild dogs was coming after me. I ran down Mission Street, twisting to snap shots under my arm at the dogs. A bus was coming, I waved at it, and it swerved toward me, and didn't stop, came faster. I was between the bus and the wild dogs. I went flat and the bus rolled over me and piled into the dogs and there was terrific howling and then a big uproar as the bus piled into a gasoline truck, on which a guy with a submachine gun was sitting, spraying bullets at me—and everyone blew up, and disappeared.

And then I heard muttering, and sighing, and Carmack was snoring. His nightmare was over. But he had sure done everything he could in it to finish me. I didn't have any doubts—he didn't like me any more.

I walked down the dank corridor, where slimy things were sleeping, and got to my cubicle that smelled more than ever of alcohol. I took the gun out of my jacket and took off the jacket and my shoes and stretched out on the bed. It had been a tiring trip home and I had a few drinks at the office and thought I could doze off. I knew from the sound of his snores that he was deep in sleep now and I wouldn't start turning into nothing for a while yet. You never know though—he's a drunk who can come to all of a sudden.

I lay there and closed my eyes. I had the .38 under my hand on the bed. I didn't see any reason that I shouldn't try to take it along when I turned into nothing. It sounded fine, what Susan said about that cool place—but you never know. Not when you've walked down as many mean streets as I have.

I lay there with good thoughts. I thought of that big meal she would have for me when I got there. It's been a hell of a long time since I had a good meal. I particularly like roast pork and sweet cabbage. I wish I'd mentioned that to Susan.

I lay there and thought of Susan.

I hope she won't forget me.

I don't think she will.

She sure has beautiful eyes.

I hope she'll remem

a **NEW** crime story by

PATRICIA MOYES

first publication in the United States

"Herbert had resigned himself to a life of servitude with his sister," but "fatal accidents happened every day in ordinary houses" . . .

A SUITABLE REVENGE

by **PATRICIA MOYES**

When Herbert Sprott first decided that he must kill his sister Myrtle, he was genuinely distressed at the idea. Not that he had ever liked her; on the contrary, he had feared and hated her ever since childhood, when Myrtle, with her four years' seniority, had bullied and taunted him into submission. The particular mixture of tyranny and possessive devotion which she exercised had been as powerful then as it was now.

Herbert had made one effort to escape when he was 22, after his father's death. He had broken away from his mother and Myrtle, and used the small amount of cash which his father had left him to put down a deposit on a small house in the suburbs. The bulk of his father's money, as he well knew, was left in trust for his mother, Myrtle, and himself. Not until two of the three were dead would it be freed for the third—except in the unlikely event of all the surviving parties agreeing to break the trust.

For a year Herbert had been quietly happy in his little house. He had even become engaged, secretly, to a girl named Betty whom he met at the Amateur Dramatic Society. His job in the Mutual and General Insurance Company was not spectacular, but he enjoyed it and he asked no more of life. And then his mother had died, and inevitably Myrtle had insisted on moving in "to look after poor Herbert." The engagement had not long survived her arrival. Betty had departed in angry tears, and Herbert—after a short period of fury—had resigned himself to a life of servitude with his sister.

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What really annoyed him most was that Myrtle was universally admired for her devotion to her brother. She was a handsome woman, with her black hair and deep blue eyes, and several men had been bold enough to propose marriage to her. She had turned them all down on the pretext that she could not abandon poor Herbert. She was an excellent cook and housekeeper, and a good businesswoman. She ran the house and administered the trust and organized clubs and charities in the neighborhood with ruthless efficiency. Herbert was considered to be a very lucky man indeed.

Like most people who resort to violence, Herbert was basically weak. It was weakness which had made him allow Myrtle to wreck his engagement, and it was weakness which started him gambling at the age of 40—weakness, combined with a hazy notion that only money could give him the strength to defy his sister.

He lost, of course; and as he tried to make good his losses, he found his income inadequate and began dipping into the Company's funds. Now things were desperate. Soon the annual audit was due, and Herbert knew that he had not been clever enough to conceal his crime. He had to have money, and he had to have it soon. There were only two alternatives: either to confess to Myrtle and beg her to agree to break the trust, or to kill her. For Herbert, the second alternative was much less terrifying than the first. His distress at the prospect was caused simply by a conviction that to kill Myrtle would be an act of *lèse-majesté* on a scale which he had never before contemplated.

Once formulated, however, the idea began to appeal to him more and more, and to give him a strange, quiet confidence. When Myrtle scolded him for coming into the house in galoshes, or lectured him on his slackness in weeding the garden, he answered her as humbly as ever. But at the back of his mind there ran, like a lilting refrain, "I'm going to kill you. You don't know it, but I am. You're only alive now because I choose to let you live a little longer. What does your power over me amount to compared with *that*?"

His work improved noticeably. Colleagues were surprised to find a new firmness in him, a willingness to make decisions. They could not know, of course, that having made the great decision to kill Myrtle, business decisions seemed infinitely small and easy in comparison. His chief wrote a glowing report on him and recommended him for promotion.

Herbert himself was quite unaware of all this, because his whole concentration was occupied in working out how Myrtle should die.

For, of course, no breath of suspicion must attach to him. He was even looking forward to playing the part of the heartbroken, bereaved brother—a suitable revenge, he felt, for Myrtle's hypocritical concern for him after his broken engagement. After all, fatal accidents happened every day in ordinary houses. This was to be just another of them.

The more Herbert considered his plan, the better he liked it. He knew that the first essential for a successful murderer was never to depart one whit from his normal routine; and it was within this routine that Herbert laid his scheme.

Routine in the Sprott household was rigid and invariable. Myrtle saw to that. Every evening, as the clock chimed ten, Myrtle would fold up her knitting and say, "Well, I'm off to bed now, Herbert. You won't forget my cocoa, will you?"

And Herbert would reply dutifully, "No, dear. Will you take a sleeping pill with it tonight?"

Here the response varied between, "Indeed I will. I haven't slept a wink all this week," and "Certainly not. I don't believe in drugging myself."

Herbert would then say timidly, "You don't mind if I sit up and do the crossword for a few minutes?"—to which the answer was a sniff, and "I can't understand grown men wasting their time with such nonsense."

This dialogue, with minor variations, had been repeated each night for the past 20 years. It was followed by Myrtle's withdrawal upstairs, while Herbert filled in a word or so of *The Times* crossword puzzle. At 10:30 prompt, he would go upstairs himself, bearing a cup of hot cocoa for Myrtle, with or without sleeping pill, as instructed. This he would take to her in bed, his final duty being to see that all her windows were securely shut—for Myrtle suffered from what she called "thin blood," and had a horror of cold bedrooms.

The final ritual dialogue went as follows:

"Here's your cocoa, dear."

"Thank you, Herbert. Have you locked the front door?"

"Yes, dear."

"And the scullery window?"

"Yes, dear."

"Switch out my gas fire, will you Herbert?"

"Yes, dear."

"Good night then, Herbert."

"Good night, Myrtle."

After this Herbert was free to go to bed, while Myrtle sipped her cocoa and read her library book.

In the morning Herbert rose at seven and made his own breakfast. Having done so, he would take a cup of tea up to his sister in bed, saying as he came into the room, "Here we are then. Half-past seven."

He would then pull back the curtains and light the gas fire. Myrtle, gulping tea, would say, "Thank you, Herbert. Have a good day at the office. What time will you be home?"

Both of them knew that he would be home at 6:37 precisely, and that no deviation from this would be tolerated. Nevertheless, Herbert would play the game and reply, "About half-past six, I expect, dear"—just as though there were a doubt about it, as though he had a choice.

So, evening and morning, the ritual farce was played out, and within this ritual Herbert saw his opportunity. Extra sleeping pills crushed up in the hot cocoa, enough to make Myrtle sleep on in the morning. A gas fire that went out accidentally in a sealed room. Only the other day he had read of such a tragedy. And afterward, he, Herbert Sprott, would be free. More than that, he would have won. He would be rich and strong and indomitable, because he would have had his revenge.

It was all surprisingly easy. When the moment came, Herbert found that his hand did not shake at all as he crushed the six sleeping pills in the bathroom and stirred them carefully into the cup.

"Here's your cocoa, dear."

"Thank you, Herbert. Have you locked the front door?"

"Yes, dear."

Inside, his heart sang, "It's the last time. Never again. Never again."

"Good night then, Herbert."

"Good night, Myrtle."

Herbert switched off the fire and went out of the room. He had a glimpse of Myrtle picking up her library book and putting the cup to her lips. He went to his own room and slept soundly.

In the morning he woke with the feeling that something special and exciting was about to happen, and almost at once remembered that this was the day when he was to kill Myrtle. In fact, his plan was already in operation. Resisting the temptation to peep into her room to see if the pills had acted, Herbert went about his ordinary

routine. At 7:30 he took Myrtle's tea upstairs, saying as usual, "Here we are then. Half-past seven." For there was always the possibility that the pills might not have taken effect.

He need not have worried. For the first time in 20 years Myrtle did not stir. She was sleeping peacefully and soundly. Herbert put the cup on the table by her bed, went over to the gas fire, and lit a match. He had even considered the possibility of somebody noticing the absence of a burnt-out match. Then he blew the match out, dropped it in the ashtray on the mantelpiece, and turned on the gas; after which he walked quickly out of the room, shutting the door—with its well-fitting draft-excluder—carefully behind him. He went downstairs, collected his umbrella, bowler hat, and briefcase, and walked briskly to the Underground station.

In the office he found a message that his Chief of Department wished to see him. For a moment Herbert's heart missed a beat. Could the irregularities in the accounts already have been discovered? Then he reassured himself. It was impossible. He had a clear two months in which to set matters in order. He went into the Chief's office.

His superior was affability itself. He complimented Herbert on the improvement in his work, on his newfound initiative. He was delighted to be able to tell Herbert that the recommendation for promotion had been approved, together with a substantial salary increase. Herbert thanked him gravely.

He went home that evening feeling calm and strong. He, Herbert Sprott, the weakling, the good-for-nothing, had conquered in the end. It struck him as merely amusing that, with his new salary, he could have managed without Myrtle's money. The money had ceased to be important. He whistled as he walked home from the station.

The sight of lights in the house did not surprise him. Very likely a neighbor, getting no reply to the doorbell, had raised the alarm. He wondered for a moment why there was no police car or ambulance, and then concluded that by now they would have been and gone. He put his key in the latch and went in, absolutely as usual.

Absolutely as usual, Myrtle's voice from the kitchen said, "Is that you, Herbert?"

Herbert stood perfectly still, pulling himself together. Something had gone wrong. Never mind. He would have to try again. In a fair imitation of his normal voice, he said, "Yes, dear."

"Come in here a moment, Herbert. I want to talk to you."

Slowly Herbert went into the kitchen. Myrtle, large and invincible

and very much alive, was stirring something in a saucepan. "Well, Herbert," she said, "how much money do you need?"

"I don't know what—"

"Oh, yes, you do. I've been waiting for this. I might have known you wouldn't have the courage to tell me. I've known for some time about your gambling. I've been through your briefcase and your desk."

Herbert found no words. Myrtle went on, "Naturally, I've been counting my sleeping pills carefully every night before I drank my cocoa. When I found six of them missing last night, I poured the stuff down the drain. I was wide-awake when you came in this morning. I just wanted to see what you would do—to make absolutely sure. Of course, there will be no scandal—so long as you do precisely as I say. I will give you the money, but from now on you will hand your entire salary over to me each month, and I will allow you as much as I think fit for fares and luncheons and cigarettes. You are smoking too much, anyhow."

She paused and looked at him. "Poor dear Herbert. Surely you didn't think you were clever enough to get away with it, did you?"

"No, dear," said Herbert.

Then he walked out of the house and back to the Underground station, where he threw himself under the next train, for it was clear that his life was over.

"Q"

a **NEW Interpol story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

Compared with some of Edward D. Hoch's other series characters—with Nick Velvet, Captain Leopold, Jeffery Rand, Dr. Sam Hawthorne—the intrepid Interpol investigators, Sebastian Blue and Laura Charme, are usually involved in the wilder cases, the more fantastic and more bizarre affairs. But one thing you can be sure of: Mr. Hoch always tells a story. The one in this renewal of Interpol adventures is the Case of the Old Men Who Disappeared. . .

INTERPOL: THE CASE OF THE STRAW SERPENT

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Werner Spatts smiled as he pushed the old man's wheelchair through the curtains into the brightly lit hall. There was an immediate roar of delight from the 50 or so assembled townspeople, and they broke into an off-key rendition of the American song, "Happy Birthday to You."

Old Georges Belcarr listened to it all and waited until the singing stopped before he grumbled to Werner, "So this is what you were up to! I should have suspected!"

"We couldn't let your ninetieth birthday pass unnoticed. Your friends from the home insisted on a party, and asked me to plan it."

"I'd have been content to celebrate alone." He'd never much cared for Spatts anyway, and this didn't change his mind.

"Nonsense! These are your friends! They love you." As he spoke, Spatts wheeled the old man forward to accept the best wishes of the townspeople. Celebrations like this were rare in small Alpine towns like Bielthurn, especially during the bleak winter months when there was little reason for people to gather anywhere but at the ski resorts.

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The party went well, and as the evening progressed Georges Belcair began to relax a bit. Spatts thought old Georges might actually be enjoying himself, often wheeling his chair across the room without help, keeping the lap robe tucked around his legs for warmth. The old man dutifully blew out the single candle on his birthday cake when the time came, and cut the first piece for the town's mayor to eat.

It was after ten when Werner Spatts brought his little van around to drive Belcair back to the rest home nearby. It had been a good evening for all, and some of the women bent to kiss the old man as he was wheeled out, promising an even bigger celebration for his one-hundredth birthday.

"That wasn't so bad now, was it?" Spatts asked as he pushed the wheelchair up the ramp and into the van. "Come on, admit that you enjoyed yourself."

"I enjoyed myself," the old man admitted. "And I have to thank you for bringing me. I only wish I'd had some warning."

"Did you have a big date tonight?" Spatts started the motor and backed out onto the highway.

"No. But I expected some friends to call."

"You should have told me. I thought I'd invited everyone."

It was only a ten-minute drive to the rest home outside of town and the road was almost deserted. When Belcair fell silent, Spatts thought for a moment that he was dozing. It was a clear night, with the light of a full moon reflecting off the snow. Werner Spatts drove carefully, watching the road for other cars.

"Did you come to Switzerland when the war broke out?" he asked the old man, mainly to see if he was still awake.

Belcair stirred in his chair. "Yes, in 1940. I fled from France during the German invasion and never went back."

"Those must have been bad times."

Ahead, Spatts could see the lights of the rest home on the hill. Some of the patients who had attended the surprise party would be following in other cars, he knew. "We're almost home now. There are the lights."

Suddenly a minibus darted out from a sheltered side road, blocking their path. Werner Spatts cursed loudly and slammed on the brakes, skidding on the snowy surface. "What's that fool doing?"

Georges Belcair leaned forward in his wheelchair, watching while two men jumped from the minibus. "I think they have come for me," he said quietly.

"What is this?"

"My destiny," Belcarr replied. His hand came out from under the lap robe holding a small Beretta pistol.

He shot Werner Spatts once in the right temple.

In the Paris suburb of Saint-Cloud there was an unusual stir of Saturday activity at the modern building that was Interpol headquarters. Sebastian Blue was working in the big file room, as he had on every weekend since the first of the year, and Laura Charmé was helping a number of other young women close by. Once when she took a break and came over to join him for coffee, he complained, "To think that I gave up Scotland Yard to sort file cards!"

"It's a mammoth project, Sebastian. There's no denying it."

"Mammoth! With information from two million file cards to be transferred to computers? We have one hundred and eighty employees here. That means over 11,000 cards per person, with everyone working on it."

Laura did some quick figuring. "Exactly 11,111 cards each. What do you think of that?"

"That makes it even worse."

The most recent meeting of Interpol's member nations had voted to restrict the activities of the section that employed Sebastian and Laura, following complaints that they were overstepping the limits on the organization's investigative powers. They could continue to gather information, but they could not directly investigate crimes—a subtle distinction that brought a snort of pent-up fury from Sebastian the first time he heard it.

The meeting had also approved, at long last, the full computerization of Interpol's operations, including the massive card file used to transmit requested information to the police forces of member nations. Sebastian and Laura, called in from their field investigations of airline and shipboard crime, had found themselves assigned to sorting file cards along with everyone else.

"Even the Secretary General is pitching in," Laura remarked, spotting the middle-aged Frenchman with his graying hair.

Sebastian put down his coffee and returned to the mountain of cards. "And we're barely into the B's!"

Laura glanced over at the women with whom she'd been working. "I think you need me more than they do. Let me just give you a hand here. What are you doing?"

"Coding each card so the computer programmer knows how to

enter it. Look here." He demonstrated with a red marking pen.

Laura took the card from his hand and held it up. "Funny—I saw this name in the paper just today."

"What name is that?"

"Belcair. Georges Belcair."

Sebastian studied the information on the card. "This is one we can discard. It'll save a bit of work."

But as he was about to toss the file card into the waste basket Laura intercepted him. "Wait a minute! I told you there was something about him in the paper."

"You mean he's still alive? At age ninety?"

"That's right. He disappeared from a town in Switzerland where he'd been living. A neighbor was driving him back to the rest home after a surprise birthday party. The neighbor was found shot to death and Belcair had disappeared."

"Odd." Sebastian scanned the information symbols and abbreviations on the face of the card. "He was a master counterfeiter before the war. Fled to Switzerland in 1940 and behaved himself ever since, so far as we know. Of course he had to, or the Swiss would have expelled him quickly enough as an undesirable."

Laura was deep in thought. "You know, this isn't the first thing of its kind I've come across. There've been others recently."

"Counterfeiters?"

"No. Old men disappearing." She stared at the file cards. "I certainly wish our computer was on line already."

"I'm sure the newspaper or the library could check out the information for you." He qualified it with, "At least they could in London."

"Oh, it's probably nothing. I just wonder about old men disappearing. What happens to them, Sebastian?"

"I'll tell you what happened to Georges Belcair. His past caught up with him. Some of his old partners in crime decided to silence him. It happens all the time."

"After forty years?"

"Mark my words, they'll find his body by tomorrow."

But even by Monday they hadn't found Georges Belcair, alive or dead. The story vanished from the papers, though Laura put in a phone call to the Swiss town of Bielthurn for further details. Then she pursued her memory of the other incidents, until by Wednesday she was able to confront Sebastian with her findings.

He looked up from his task. "What have you got, Laura?"

"It's about that ninety-year-old man who disappeared in Switzerland. The Swiss police still don't have a thing on it, and I've found several other similar cases during the last two years."

"How many?"

"Nine in all, counting this latest one. Two in England, one in Ireland, three in Italy, and one each in France, West Germany, and Switzerland."

"All the same?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "No one was killed in the earlier instances. Mostly the old people simply walked away from their houses or nursing homes or sanitariums. Several were presumed to have been suicides, though the bodies were never found."

"It happens a great deal," Sebastian said. "An elderly person goes off and jumps from a bridge, or becomes confused and wanders into the woods."

"You don't see a pattern here?"

"I'm afraid not, Laura."

"These were all men over the age of ninety. One was ninety-five."

"But it was over a period of years, in six different countries. That's hardly so unusual."

"Two years. Not so long."

Sebastian sighed and leaned back in his chair. "This isn't for Interpol, Laura, regardless of what it is."

"No, I suppose not," she admitted reluctantly.

"Where are you going now?"

"I thought I'd just check our files on the other eight, to see if they're listed as Belcarr was."

He went back to his work. "You won't find anything."

"Why not?"

"You said they were all over ninety. Once a criminal is listed as reaching the age of ninety, all his Interpol records are destroyed."

"What?" His words had frozen her where she stood. "Are you serious?"

"Of course. Interpol's function is to furnish information on *active* criminals to police forces in member countries. Once a person is listed as having reached the age of ninety we assume he's dead, or at least beyond his criminal days. We try to keep a current file, weeding out old material."

"I've been here all these years and never knew that! Now I understand why you were about to discard Belcarr's file the other day."

"It was just chance that you caught the name."

"So all nine of these old men could have been in our files at one time."

"*Could* have been," Sebastian emphasized. "It's sheer guesswork."

"Guesswork has paid off in the past," Laura reminded him. "I think it's worth looking into."

"Just how do you propose to do that?"

"By finding out what happened to Georges Belcair."

Laura Charme knew that Sebastian didn't approve of her going off on her own, contrary to specific Interpol regulations, to investigate a crime. But she had a feeling—call it intuition if nothing else—that the disappearances of these nine old men were somehow linked. So she drove down to Bielthurn on Saturday morning, using the excuse of a sick relative to avoid the usual weekend of work on the file cards. The Swiss border was a good four hours' drive from Paris, but the winter traffic was light and the roads were good. She made it to the town by early afternoon.

Superintendent Muller was the man in charge of the investigation and he proved to be formidable. After carefully inspecting her credentials he asked, "Exactly what is Interpol's interest in this matter, please?"

"We have a file on Belcair. He was a notorious counterfeiter in the prewar years."

"That was so long ago!" Muller was large and full of expression, like a figure glimpsed in a comic opera. Laura felt uneasy in his presence, certain that his manner masked a steel-trap mind.

"Still," she insisted, "it could help to explain his disappearance."

"Perhaps so," Muller admitted grudgingly.

"What about this man who was killed?" She caught his eyes studying her and was almost sorry she'd worn a ski outfit. He probably thought of her as a girl on a holiday.

"Werner Spatts. A nice fellow in his late thirties. He took a special interest in the folks at the rest home. I can't imagine who'd want to kill him."

"Does he have a wife or family I could speak with?"

The superintendent shook his head. "He came here after a divorce a couple of years back, and lived alone. He was a salesman for sanitarium supplies and traveled around a great deal."

"Then I think I should visit the rest home."

"They can tell you nothing."

"We'll see."

The rest home stood on a hill just off the main road. Laura passed the spot where Spatts's body and van had been found, and drove the rest of the way up to the parking lot. But Muller had obviously covered the ground already. The doctors and nurses could tell her nothing new. Some of the patients had asked Spatts to help arrange the party and he'd agreed. He was driving Belcair back when it happened. Judging from the tire tracks in the snow, another vehicle had cut them off. There were footprints of two men who'd removed Belcair's wheelchair and transferred it to their vehicle.

"Could I speak to some of the other patients?" Laura asked.

The doctor introduced her to an elderly woman named Mrs. Zaich who'd occupied the room next to Belcair. "Dearie," the woman said, speaking with a disconcerting cockney accent, "I think he planned to disappear."

"Why do you say that?" Laura wondered.

"I caught him tidying up his room that day, sorting through his drawers—as if he wanted to make sure he wasn't leaving anything important behind."

"Did he have many visitors? Especially in recent weeks?"

"There was no family. Mr. Spatts came, of course, and there was another man about a week before he disappeared."

"Tell me about the other man."

Mrs. Zaich pondered. "Looked like a prizefighter, I'd say, with a broken nose and a scar on his jaw."

"Had he been here before?"

"Not that I know of, but Mr. Belcair was expecting him. I heard him say he'd gotten the man's letter. The man said something about a straw serpent."

"Straw serpent?"

"That's right. Odd, isn't it?"

Laura agreed it was odd. "You've no idea of the man's name?"

"I heard Mr. Belcair call him Feather or something like that. It sounded like Feather, anyway."

Laura thanked her and departed. The visit had yielded as much as she could reasonably have expected. The rest was up to her. She found a phone and put in a call back to Sebastian Blue in Paris, asking him to locate a directory of sanitariums and nursing homes.

"Why that?" he wanted to know.

"If these disappearances are linked, and if the old men are still alive, they have to be cared for somewhere. A nursing home of some sort is the most likely place."

"All right," Sebastian agreed. "What do I look for?"

"A man named Feather or something that sounds like Feather. He could be on the staff."

"The directory we have at the office doesn't list staff members."

"But it lists owners, resident physicians, and the like. He could be one of those. I know I'm clutching at straws."

"I'll check it through," he promised, "but you get back here. I don't like you traipsing around the Swiss countryside."

"I promise to be back tomorrow. Check this out for me and I'll phone you again in an hour."

She hung up and went back to her car. It was mid-afternoon and she suddenly remembered she'd had no lunch. There was a little café on the town's main street which seemed as good a place as any. Over a bowl of soup and a sandwich she decided the middle-aged waitress might know something of the area. "Are there any other nursing homes nearby?" she asked. "Besides the one up on the hill?"

"Not in Bielthurn. That's the only one here. We don't need more than one."

"How about a man named Feather? Do you know anyone of that name?"

"Can't say that I do," was the reply. The woman went into the back room with a stack of dirty dishes.

It was then that Laura scored her first lucky break. An older woman at one of the other tables, whom she hadn't noticed before, spoke up. "There was a Dr. Fesser at a sanitarium across the border in France. He treated my son for tuberculosis some years back. Could he be the one you're seeking?"

"Fesser? What did he look like?"

"Not like a doctor. He had a scarred face and a broken nose from a car accident."

Laura felt her pulse racing. "Where is this sanitarium?"

"At Uhle in the Haute Savoie, not far from here. But I understand the sanitarium is closed now. Tuberculosis is not the threat it once was."

Ten minutes later Laura was on the road, heading back across the border to the little town south of Lake Geneva. She did not remember her promise to phone Sebastian Blue.

The sanitarium, when she reached it, was indeed closed—but that was not the same as being empty. A light dusting of snow by the gates revealed the passage of vehicles, and in the fading light she

could detect the glow of electric bulbs. The sprawling old building was indeed occupied. She parked her car down the road and climbed quickly over the locked gates, feeling just a bit like the fearful heroine in a Gothic novel.

Before she was halfway to the house, the dogs started barking and she realized her mistake. A guard of some sort rounded the corner of the house and spotted her immediately. He ran toward her, shouting something in German.

Laura stood her ground, waiting till he was close enough to grab her. Then, as he reached out a hand, she caught his wrist and twisted, flipping him over onto his back. She started running then, circling the house, but the barking of the dogs drew nearer. When the first one came into view, teeth bared and menacing, she knew she had no chance. Someone grabbed her arms from behind and she didn't resist.

Two guards took her inside, where she was met by the man with the broken nose. He studied her for a moment, letting his eyes run up and down her slim body in its one-piece ski suit. "I am Hans Fesser," he said at last. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"I—I've come to find my grandfather. I think he's here."

"The sanitarium has been closed for some years. We have only a housekeeping staff remaining."

For a moment she considered the possibility of error. Then her eyes went past Fesser and she saw the large straw basket on the table behind him. The straw was in the form of a coiled snake, with its upraised head serving as a handle. It was the straw serpent Mrs. Zaich had mentioned.

"My grandfather is Georges Belcair," Laura announced in a firm voice. "I demand to see him!"

Hans Fesser hesitated, off guard. Finally he shrugged. "You shall see him then." He started up the wide front stairs to the second floor and she followed without invitation. The guards made no effort to restrain her.

They entered a large sun room at the rear of the second floor, where eight elderly men sat in the gathering twilight. Four of them were playing cards and three others were talking, while the eighth dozed in his wheelchair. Fesser shook the dozing man until he opened his eyes.

"Georges, I have brought your granddaughter to visit you."

Belcair stared up at her, uncomprehending. "I have no granddaughter. I have never seen this young lady before in my life."

"As I suspected," Fesser said. A small revolver had appeared in his hand, and it was pointed at Laura's chest.

She sat down, careful not to lose her composure. "Before you shoot me you could at least tell me what this is all about."

The other elderly men had interrupted their card game and chatting to gather around. "Is she from him?" one of them asked. "Did Straw Serpent send her?"

"No," Hans Fesser replied. "She's a spy."

"I know a good deal of it already," Laura said, improvising quickly. The fact that these elderly men were here at all bore out the major part of her wild theory. "I know you've been gathering up men over ninety years of age from sanitariums and nursing homes across Europe. And I knew these men are all former international criminals. Their records would be on file at Interpol except for our unfortunate practice of destroying files once a person reaches the age of ninety."

"Interpol? You're from Interpol?"

"That's right. I have identification in my wallet. And they know where I am."

Fesser smiled. "I doubt that. Interpol doesn't send you women climbing over locked gates. If you are indeed an Interpol employee you're here without authorization—which means without their knowledge."

"Let's kill her," old Georges Belcair growled. "Be done with it!"

Hans Fesser turned on him. "You've done enough killing, Georges. If you hadn't shot that man Spatts this young woman might never have become interested in us."

"Oh?" Laura perked up her ears. "The police assumed you killed Spatts when you kidnapped Belcair."

"Let them assume anything they want." Though Fesser was willing to talk, the revolver pointing at her chest never wavered. "My instructions were to follow up on initial contacts with these people, arranging for their disappearance and transportation here. The instructions were quite specific as to avoiding violence of any sort. These old men would simply disappear, or wander away. There should be nothing to excite more than the most routine police investigation. Unfortunately, Georges here had a pistol that we didn't know about. The plan was to remove him from Spatts's van after the surprise birthday party. Georges thought he was helping us by killing Spatts."

Laura looked around at the eight elderly faces, lined and sagging with age. "There were nine men who disappeared. Or was the ninth merely a coincidence?"

"No, there were nine," Fesser confirmed with a sigh. "One died last year. In an operation extending over two years, involving men in their nineties, we were bound to lose someone. That was why we moved up the recruitment of Belcair to the very day of his ninetieth birthday—before we lose any more to natural causes."

"That was your mistake," Laura confirmed. "His file hadn't yet been destroyed. But what do you want them for?"

One of the old men answered. "Only the Straw Serpent knows. But it's big! It'll be the biggest job ever pulled off in Europe. We've been promised a million pounds each!"

She faced the man who had spoken. "What do people like you—men in your nineties—need with a million pounds each?"

"We have families like everyone else—children and grandchildren we want to look after. We're too old for the money to help us, but if we can pull off one last job successfully and provide for our families we can die happy."

She suddenly realized they'd all been speaking English. "Who is this mysterious Straw Serpent person—and why do you all speak English?"

"Straw Serpent is a code name for the operation," Fesser explained. "Because none of us knows the name of the person who has planned it all, we've taken to calling him Straw Serpent. As for the English, part of the operation will depend upon our ability to speak it well. That is why we constantly practise."

"I can't believe a gang of men in their nineties are going to pull off a big robbery."

"There is no robbery involved," he assured her, and the others nodded their assent. Sitting in the midst of these elderly, wizened creatures, Laura felt just a bit like Snow White and her dwarfs.

She suddenly remembered the file on Georges Belcair. "You're not robbers—you're counterfeiters!"

They exchanged looks, and it was Belcair who spoke. "Kill her," he said simply to Fesser. "Kill her now. She knows too much."

"But we must find out just how much."

Laura hurried on. Conversation would at least keep her alive. "You're going to counterfeit huge quantities of American dollars, and then pass them in bulk somehow. That's why your English needs to be good. That's why so many of you are needed—so the

engraving and printing skills some of you no longer possess can be supplied by the others. Then, when the time comes to pass the currency, who would suspect a group of sweet old men—retired bankers or brokers, perhaps? Even if a check is run with Interpol it will reveal nothing. You have all lived long enough to become innocent again in our eyes. You have outlived your pasts!”

“She’s smart,” one of the old men admitted.

“Where will you pass the money? In a Swiss bank so conveniently located across Lake Geneva?”

“We don’t know!” Belcarr blurted out. “That’s why we’re waiting for the Straw Serpent.”

“We’ve told her enough,” Fesser said. “Keep quiet!”

“What difference does it make when we’re going to kill her anyhow?” Belcarr reached out for the gun. “If you won’t kill her, I will!”

Laura tensed to spring if the weapon changed hands, but before she could there was the sound of a buzzer from somewhere deep within the building. “What’s that?” someone asked.

“The front gate.”

“Someone’s there.”

Belcarr relaxed. “It must be him—the Straw Serpent—come at last to tell us of our mission.”

“Let him in!”

Hans Fesser had turned pale. “It could be the police. I don’t—”

“Let him in!” the old men insisted. “We’ve waited long enough.”

“Let him deal with the girl!”

“Somebody watch her,” Fesser ordered, and then hurried to a front window to peer out toward the gate. “It’s too dark. I can’t see anything.”

“Open it!”

Reluctantly he pushed a button on the wall, then flipped another switch that illuminated the sanitarium grounds. Laura rose from her chair and walked over to a large glass window to watch. No one tried to stop her.

“See!” Belcarr shouted triumphantly. “It’s him!”

There was indeed a lone figure walking up the driveway from the gate. He wore a bulky upturned overcoat and a fur hat that completely masked his features. Fesser lifted the gun uncertainly. “That’s not the Straw Serpent. It’s a trick.”

“It has to be him!” another of the old men insisted. “Open the door!” Others took up the cry. They had waited so long they couldn’t be denied now.

"All right!" Fesser agreed at last. But he poked Laura with the gun. "You'll come downstairs with me." Some of the others who could negotiate the stairs came along too. Belcair wheeled his chair to the landing and watched from above.

There was a knocking on the big front door and Hans Fesser reached out to open it. Laura saw her chance and grabbed the handle of the straw basket on the hall table.

Then the door swung open and the stranger entered. It was Sebastian Blue and he was holding a gun in his right hand.

"Sebastian!"

He smiled at her. "Just off the helicopter from Paris, come to rescue you once more."

Fesser made a lunge for Laura, seeking a shield. In one swift movement she hit him in the face with the straw-serpent basket.

Sebastian herded the eight old men back to the solarium and locked the door. Then he came downstairs to join Laura who was holding the gun on Hans Fesser. "There are a couple of outside guards," she warned.

Sebastian motioned to Fesser. "Call them in. No tricks."

When they'd been locked up too, Laura found time to ask, "How'd you ever find me here, Sebastian?"

"I looked up Feather in the directory as you asked me to. When I found no one I tried similar-sounding names. When I found Fesser, it seemed likely, especially when I ran a check on him and learned he had an Interpol record for currency manipulation. He wasn't over ninety like the others. Anyway, you didn't call back and I grew worried. I decided to come looking for you and spotted your car in the road. Knowing you, I suspected you climbed over the fence to get in. I decided on a more direct approach and it worked."

"They were expecting someone else," Laura said, and went on to tell him everything she'd learned, from the murder of Werner Spatts to the long wait for the man they called the Straw Serpent. Sebastian listened to it all in silence, interrupting only once or twice with a question.

When it was over he simply shook his head. "A massive counterfeiting scheme involving ninety-year-old men! Unbelievable! Could any of them still be capable of their old skills?"

"Fesser's been living here with some of them for two years. That's a question he should be able to answer."

Hans Fesser studied them both, perhaps weighing the possibilities

of a deal. "If I tell you what I know, will you let me off? After all, I've committed no crime. The plan was never actually put into operation."

"What about that man Spatts who was killed in Bielthurn?" Sebastian asked. "The Swiss authorities certainly view that as a crime."

"That old fool Belcair shot him, not me! Take him back to Switzerland with you."

"We don't make arrests," Sebastian said, with a glance at Laura. "We don't even investigate crimes on an official basis. This all came about because Laura was suspicious about these old men disappearing. They're all counterfeiters?"

"Mostly. A couple dealt in black-market currency after the war. He—the one they call the Straw Serpent—had the whole thing planned. We've been working on the plates and printing for two years, here in this building. At first we only planned to use four men, but one died and the other three had lost some of their skills. So we had to keep recruiting more. The thing dragged on. Finally we needed Belcair, but we had to wait till he turned ninety so his records would no longer be on file with Interpol."

"Who is the Straw Serpent?" Laura asked.

"I don't know. We did all our planning on the telephone. I never saw his face."

"That's hard to believe," Sebastian said.

"Did he speak English?" Laura wanted to know.

"Yes, always in English. The disposal of the counterfeit money hinged on us all speaking English."

"But you don't know what the actual plan is?"

"No. Only he knows that."

"And so you wait for him." Sebastian leaned back in his chair. "Perhaps we should wait too."

"I don't think that'll do us any good," Laura said. "Fesser was the only doubtful one when you walked up that driveway a while ago. I think he had reason to be doubtful. He knew the Straw Serpent wasn't coming because there is no Straw Serpent. It's nothing but a serpent-shaped basket out in the front hall. The myth of a master criminal was simply a device for shifting the blame off Fesser's shoulders if the scheme went wrong."

"I swear that's not true!" Fesser said. "Do you think I could plan this whole thing on my own? And if I had, why would I be sitting here waiting for the next move?"

"What should we do, Sebastian? Call in the local police?"

"If there's really counterfeiting gear in this building there's cause for arrest. And certainly Georges Belcair can be charged with murder. But that doesn't get us any closer to the truth about the Straw—"

"What is it, Sebastian?"

"Just an idea. A crazy, wild idea." He considered it for a moment. "But I think you're correct, Laura. The Straw Serpent won't be coming here. Will he, Fesser?"

The man with the broken nose moistened his lips. "You know as much as I do."

"Exactly as much." Sebastian stood up. "The Straw Serpent won't be coming because he's dead. The man behind this whole scheme was the unfortunate Mr. Werner Spatts."

Laura couldn't believe it. "Spatts! But that's impossible! Why would Belcair kill him if he was their leader?"

"Because he was too clever in developing and leading his double life. Belcair had no idea it was Spatts who was recruiting him, and when he thought Spatts might interfere with his escape from the rest home he shot him. Spatts was a salesman who called on sanitariums and rest homes. It gave him a perfect opportunity to locate these elderly criminals he needed for his scheme. From what you told me he moved to Bielthurn a couple of years ago—just about the time the plan was set in motion. After Spatts decided that Belcair was needed, you visited him at the rest home, Fesser, and told him about the Straw Serpent operation. The old man was obviously an eager convert, as the others had been."

"I don't know anything about it," Fesser insisted.

"That's clearly untrue. Your orders were to avoid violence, and yet you intercepted the van while Spatts was driving home from the birthday party. Either you intended to take Belcair by force, or Spatts was in on the scheme and you knew it."

He seemed to know when he was beaten. "All right," he agreed. "It was all Spatts's plan. Two years we put into it, and that old fool goes and shoots him by mistake! I couldn't bring myself to tell them what had happened. I couldn't ruin their two years of hope by telling them I didn't know what he planned to do with that damned counterfeit money. I've just been sitting here with them these last few days, pretending to be waiting for him, hoping something would happen."

"Something did happen," Sebastian said. "Laura found you."

Later she asked him how he knew it was Spatts. "He's the last person I would have thought of," she admitted.

"Sometimes things are so obvious you just don't see them. They were careful to use the English language in this whole operation, and when it came to choosing a code name Spatts used the language too."

She simply stared at him and Sebastian smiled. "Don't you see it yet? Straw Serpent is an anagram for Werner Spatts."



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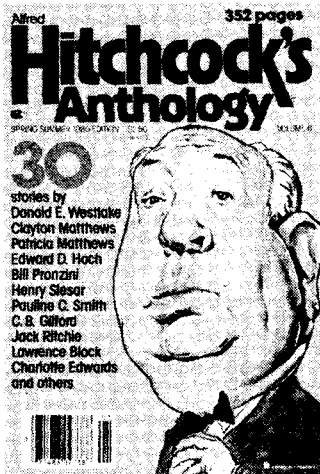
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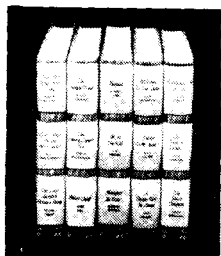
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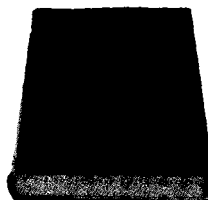
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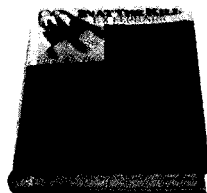
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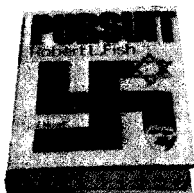
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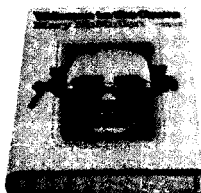
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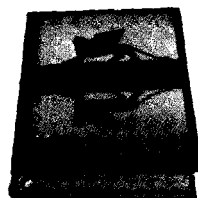
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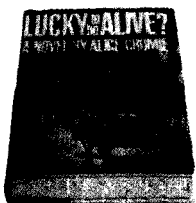
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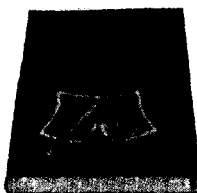
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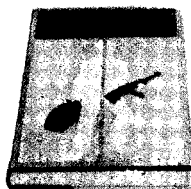
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